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Suzanne and Joseph Pasquier

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The Pasquier Chronicles, translated by Béatrice de Holthorpe, comprise

THE PASQUIER CHRONICLES (1937)

NEWS FROM HAVRE (*La Notaire du Havre*)

CAGED BEASTS (*Le Jardin des bêtes sauvages*)

IN SIGHT OF THE PROMISED LAND (*Vue de la Terre Promise*)

ST. JOHN'S EVE (*La Nuit de la Saint-Jean*)

THE HOUSE IN THE DESERT (*Le Désert de Bièvres*)

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CÉCILE AMONG THE PASQUIERS (1940)

PASTORS AND MASTERS (*Les Maîtres*)

CÉCILE (*Cécile parmi nous*)

THE FIGHT AGAINST THE SHADOWS (*Le Combat contre les ombres*)

SUZANNE AND JOSEPH PASQUIER (1946)

SUZANNE AND THE YOUNG MEN (*Suzanne et les jeunes hommes*)

THE PASSION OF JOSEPH PASQUIER (*La Passion de Joseph Pasquier*)

Suzanne and Joseph
Pasquier *by Georges Duhamel*

Translator BÉATRICE DE HOLTHOIR



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BÉATRICE DE HOLTHOIR

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LA PASSION DE JOSEPH PASQUIER 1942

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SUZANNE AND THE YOUNG MEN

I

So cold was it in this dark, dusty retreat where human beings looked like their own ghosts, that Queen Marie-Antoinette could not repress a slight shiver. She began to cough and then yawned delicately.

The queen was wearing a light summer dress such as a lady of fashion might wear on a warm July day. She held out a slender foot sheathed in a satin slipper to which an elderly maid was adjusting a paste buckle. On that grey, bowed head the queen laid a hand, as if moved by an impulse of dreamy compassion. Then the old woman stood up again, sighed, stepped back a pace, winking her withered eyelids as she surveyed her work in the half-light, and suddenly faded away in the direction of a shadowy corner.

Queen Marie-Antoinette fell once more into an uneasy reverie. She had fine eyes of a periwinkle blue with long eyelashes heavily darkened with make-up. A patch, cunningly placed on the margin of the cheek, quivered with the slightest movement of the lips, and the lips would tighten and then swell softly into that famous pout, which, but lately at Versailles, before the days of agony, some thought divine and others hateful.

Suddenly a double door was flung open. A flood of red light filled the dusty retreat, while a voice broke through the deep silence: 'The Queen.'

She stepped forward in the full light with a grave and truly majestic air, neck held stiffly and heart beating fast under the high-laced bodice. A man was standing in the centre of the lighted space, a sort of ogre with an enormous pock-marked face. And suddenly the creature bowed and stooped until his knee touched the ground. Mirabeau! Such, then, was the horrible brute with whom she must parley, come to terms, perhaps use deceit.

At that moment the strangest thing happened. Out of a

pit of darkness pierced by two or three red stars, a voice arose, strong, vibrant, authoritative, a voice that shouted roughly:

'No! no! I told you to be afraid. You're afraid of Mirabeau. Well, no one would guess it.'

The queen stopped short with a gesture of irritation and gazed towards the shadowy gap which oddly enough took the place of the fourth wall of the *salon*. The voice began again, less roughly:

'Of course the queen is afraid. Isn't that your idea, mon cher maître?'

There was a brief silence. Then a match flared and for a second there was a glimpse of a visage covered with grey hair: beard, moustache, and bushy eyebrows. Eventually a voice emerged from all this shaggy vegetation:

'Certainly she's afraid, but she doesn't allow it to be seen. She is miraculously calm. She is, all at once, a very great lady, and that is what gives the scene its surprising character.'

'Yes, yes, yes, yes,' was heard, *decrescendo* in a voice that lacked conviction. Queen Marie-Antoinette turned towards the shades and said, somewhat peevishly:

'Well then, what is it you wish me to do?'

Silence fell once more, and the first of the two voices resumed, suddenly grown weary and peevish:

'We'll see, Suzanne. But it's certainly not a bit right.'

'In the meantime I shall catch cold,' exclaimed the queen, shrugging her shoulders. 'It's all very fine to say in the script that it's July, but it's freezing in the corridors.'

The first of the voices emerged once more from the darkness. It was at once dry, polite, and ironical.

'Make your entrance again, Suzanne, and register the sort of shudder you feel at the sight of Mirabeau. We'll try it in that way, mon cher maître. You'll see for yourself that it will be very effective and at the same time psychologically correct.'

'But the script, the script, Vidame!'

'Oh, you can trust me, I have the profoundest respect for

the script. But there is nothing in the script that contradicts the interpretation we are going to try out.'

A growl came from the inky depths:

'Nothing in the script? . . . But look here, Vidame, I know the script. Hang it all, I wrote it. . . .'

The queen had again come through the door. Again Mirabeau bent his knee. Again the queen extended her hand for the ogre to kiss. And again the voice of Vidame pierced the darkness.

'You look as if you were playing *Les Fausses Confidences*. No, no, mademoiselle, you must express fear and disgust but not curiosity. You're scared! You're scared!'

The queen grasped a little fan hanging from a ribbon, opened it with insolent deliberation, and said:

'Can't help it. I'm not scared.'

From Eric Vidame could be heard a kind of checked whistle.

'And you're no good either, Farge! You look dazzled, radiant, you're not in the least alarming.'

'But,' said Chérouvier, running a gnarled hand through his beard, 'Mirabeau is radiant, that's exactly my conception of him. Tell me, mon bon ami, who's that I see over there, standing right at the back of the stage on the right?'

'What? What? What?' croaked Eric Vidame absently. 'Over there? On the right? That's the designer, Philippe Baudoin, the little designer.'

'Why "little"? He's not so little'

Vidame waved vaguely and turned his attention back to the actors.

'If we go on like this we shall never finish. There are impossible days when work gets bogged and everything seems hopeless. Now then, Suzanne, begin again. Farge, old man, slobber a bit, wiggle your toes inside your shoes, try to squint.'

'But excuse me,' said M. Noël Chérouvier timidly, 'Mirabeau hadn't a squint.'

'That doesn't matter in the least, mon cher maître. Men like Mirabeau always squint under the influence of their passions . . . Now, for God's sake do let us get on! Just

let us be, mon cher maître. It's our job to get out of your work all that you have put into it, sometimes without even meaning to.'

He paused and then murmured coaxingly, banteringly:

'We are the revealers of hidden genius.'

A slight grunt of dissent was heard from M. Chéiouvier. The rehearsal started again and the actors, now in better form, took in their stride the obstacles which a few minutes earlier had seemed insurmountable. The slow work stumbled, crawled, drowsed, but every now and again, in a momentary flash, the miracle, that wayward miracle of the stage, illuminated that dark cavern. Suzanne Pasquier delivered a speech and it was the very voice of the murdered queen rising from the tragic past; Mirabeau was on his feet striking his breast and no one remembered that there was a corpulent actor called Farge, famous for his imitations and his love of puns. No one remembered that Farge, wounded at Lassigny at the beginning of 1917, had a stiff right wrist. What every one saw was the hideous, gifted Mirabeau in the heat of that famous day of July 1790 when the queen had made her attempt to tame the untamable one. The light no longer sprang from the triple-rotation projectors that Eric Vidame had installed and which he looked upon as one of his titles to glory; it shone across the dead century from the blinding sun of the past. And the handful of silent men, sunk motionless in seats stripped of their linen dust-covers, were caught up for a moment and held spell-bound.

'Suzanne is fine,' said Emmanuel des Combes, clearing his throat to hide his emotion.

Des Combes was a friend of the *patron*, the guardian angel of the Théâtre des Carmes, the heaven-sent man who always managed to get hold of ten thousand francs for the end of the month, the man who was always deputed to go and argue with the landlord or one of the two sub-lessees, the man who was ready for every sacrifice and every task. He repeated as he blew his nose gently:

'Suzanne is marvellous!'

As Vidame made no comment, des Combes turned towards the author and said with sincere conviction though diffidently:

'As for me, I think she's perfect. What do you say, monsieur?'

Noel Chérouvier twirled some of the hair of his beard between his thumb and first finger, producing a slight crackling sound.

'She's certainly quite good,' he murmured, 'but this isn't what I originally had in mind.'

In a sort of aside he added with feigned casualness:

'Do you know Nina Praga?'

'The Polish woman?'

• 'Yes, the Polish woman.'

Emmanuel des Combes was about to reply, but first he threw an inquiring glance towards the *patron*; Vidame shrugged his shoulders and said in a bored voice:

'I warned you from the first, mon cher maître, that it is one of the principles of this theatre never to make special outside engagements. I work with my own troupe, the company I have created and trained, moulded as it were out of the elemental clay. . . . Look, look, that's not half bad, what Suzanne's doing now. You think so too, don't you, Mano?'

His whole attention suddenly concentrated on the stage, Emmanuel des Combes made no reply. A moment later, with the tip of his first finger he wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. His tears came easily, but they were a useful indication to the *patron*, who when he wanted to ascertain if a certain effect had caught on, would inquire irreverently: 'Is Mano exuding? Yes? Then it's O.K.'

Mirabeau had just made his exit after a tirade full of eructations, abdominal rumblings, and spluttering fireworks. King Louis XVI was crossing the stage with a few words when Vidame hissed out at him:

'Not like Boubouroche, hang it! A king, Helloun! A fool of a king, no doubt, but for all that a king. And then: I say, old boy, do for God's sake try not to pronounce all

your hard *t*'s as if they were *t*'s. You say "tarattère" for "caractère." It's ghastly.'

King Louis XVI turned to face the darkness. His whole visage expressed such despair that it looked for a moment as if he were about to burst into tears

'Oh, gosh!' sighed Eric Vidame 'What a fat-head he is, that poor old Paul!'

Paul Hellouin was Vidame's whipping-boy and his oldest disciple. He played the noble fathers, the plain dealers, the fat men: whereas he longed to play the philosophers, the dispensers of maxims, the saints and sages, and even the tragic kings or the dispossessed princes. Unfortunately, no sooner had he made his entrance than he produced exquisitely comic effects. Vidame used sometimes to say absent-mindedly:

'I must try you in fool parts. Who knows? Might suit you. We must see'

Thereupon with every fibre of his being Hellouin would register the deepest affliction. He would plead, stammering:

'No, *patron*. No, you don't mean it.'

But Vidame's thoughts would have already flown elsewhere.

Queen Marie-Antoinette dropped a light curtsy and quitted the magic *salon*. The darkness of the corridors blinded her for a moment and she called, putting her hands out:

'You're there, Charlemagne?'

The elderly dresser appeared as if by magic. She was a widow and her name actually was Mme Charlemagne. She wore this preposterous patronymic with humility.

To reach Suzanne's dressing-room one had to follow a long, badly lit passage whose walls were streaked here and there with coffee-coloured trickles of moisture. Then one entered a very small room, crowded, but very brightly illuminated. Queen Marie-Antoinette opened the door and in that same haughty, yet gracious voice that she used at court when speaking of her '*charmants vilains sujets*,' she said sharply:

'You don't waste a minute! At least you are going to give me time to get off my make-up.'

She had put out her hand, a little hand all white with cream

and powder. The man who bent to kiss that hand was not Count Axel de Fersen. It was a young man in a sort of tweed box-coat, very old but very elegant. A handsome curly head, carried on a straight white neck, emerged from this strange garment. The features were delicate and well cut. The look, which never wavered, had something of that perfect limpidity which we admire in the eyes of a child. He drew out from under his cape a large linen-covered album and said with a smile:

'Don't undress at once: I want to make one more sketch.'

'Very, well, then, show me the others.'

The young man flushed slightly.

'They're not very good. You were looking cross.'

'Yes, yes,' agreed the queen with a frown; 'they don't know what they want, either of them, the *patron* or the author.'

'Well, then,' said the artist, opening his sketch-book, 'give me another ten minutes, Suzanne, just for art's sake.'

She began to smile.

'Ten minutes, that's a lot. I shall get bored. Philippe, you must tell me a story.'

The young man took two or three steps backwards so as to get the right distance. He limped, though not ungracefully, and seeking support he finally wedged himself in a corner of the wall. Immediately he began to sketch in light, almost imperceptible strokes, which fluttered hither and thither like thoughts in search of a truth. He gazed at his sitter with such an absorbed intensity that the queen suddenly cried.

'Tell me a story, Philippe, or I shall fall asleep. I feel I'm going to sleep.'

'Right,' murmured the young man. 'I'll tell you the story of the guardian angel.'

He did not pause in his drawing and he spoke softly as if he had undertaken to tame some very restive creature. Suddenly the girl turned her eyes on him with an expression of childish curiosity.

'What do you mean? What guardian angel are you talking about?'

'Wait, I'll tell you. It's not really a story, but it's something quite out of the common. I once saw my guardian angel.'

'Philippe, you believe in guardian angels?'

'I don't say I believe in guardian angels, I'm only telling you that I once saw mine. It was in 1918, in July, after my wound I was being nursed at Châlons-sur-Marne and I had a high temperature, especially at night, like all wounded men. And one night I woke up I was at the far end of an Adrian hut. There was just one little lamp at the other end of the hut. But I assure you that the light where I lay was marvellous, and there on the foot of the bed the angel was sitting, quite naturally, like a living person. Besides, it was a living person. He was toying with a long snowy feather, a white peacock's feather. He was very still and very beautiful. And as I put out my hand I immediately realized that he was extremely sensitive. For instance, he couldn't bear me to touch a feather of his wings. For at once. Raise your head slightly, 'ease.'

'Yes, yes. At once, you were saying?'

'At once his wings began to quiver and beat. It made quite a wind and noise, as if one were teasing some great wild bird. I was afraid that the others would wake up and that the angel would be obliged to take flight, or rather disappear.'

There was a long silent interval and the queen shivered slightly.

'I've never seen my guardian angel,' she sighed. 'Probably I haven't got one.'

'Oh, yes, you have,' said the young man quite seriously. 'Some day I'll draw a portrait of your guardian angel.'

'What's he like?'

'I'll tell you with my pencil, some day, when you come to Nesles.'

'I'm going to Nesles on Sunday.'

'No, you can't. Rehearsals will be over and you will be playing evenings and matinées. No use coming to Nesles for a brief visit. You must come and be with us really, living our life without having to dash off the next morning. Oh, I'll

wait We'll all wait My father was saying yesterday: "You must show her the Pasquers' old garden, the garden which belonged to Charles-Bruno Pasquier, Thérésine Pic's husband I never knew him, I was too young, but long ago I saw the three children, Léopold, Anna, and Raymond, Raymond who comes here from time to time and whose voice I recognize " That's what my father said But never mind about that You are coming to Nesles, to our house, to live there with us I'm positive about that Your room is ready and everybody will contribute something to it. a sketch for the walls, a flower for the vases, a log for the fire Every one is expecting you '

The queen yielded to the enchantment of this ardent appeal She let her head, laden with its bows and powdered curls, droop towards her shoulder With a slight movement of his pencil the artist recalled her to her pose And already, his mouth open, a slight film of saliva glistening on his white teeth, he was about to speak, when the door of the dressing-room was pushed open by a rough hand Eric Vidame entered.

'You might at least knock,' said the queen, on her feet at once, rebellious, fan in hand

The *patron* smiled.

'Hallo, you're there, my boy,' he said, throwing Philippe a patronizing glance.

The young man was already on his feet With a charming touch of haughtiness he said:

'I was here, monsieur, but now I've finished.'

'Show me your sketches, won't you?' said Vidame, slightly mollified.

'If you don't mind, monsieur, I'll show them to you tomorrow after I've looked them over and mounted them decently.'

He went off, limping slightly, along the dim passage with its streaky walls. Eric Vidame closed the door and sat down with a sigh, astride on an old chair.

II

So long as he neither moved nor spoke Eric Vidame looked like Dante. He had a lean face, long, well-cut features, and a forelock that jutted out like a headland between two gulfs of white brow. He was not unmindful of this resemblance, and on the wall of his office, just beside the looking-glass and on a level with his eyes, he had hung a fine portrait of the poet, before which he loved to dream. By dint of dwelling on this portrait and by a miracle of mimicry he had succeeded not only in counterfeiting that lofty and noble expression, but in reproducing the very furrows and planes of his model. He had finely drawn eyebrows, thin lips, and a well-modelled chin. As the nose was not long enough to represent the famous Tuscan profile, he acquired a dreamy, almost unconscious habit of stroking and remodelling this feature, which seemed to respond to the attentions of its owner and day by day to gain in strength and perhaps even in haughty dignity.

As soon as Eric Vidame began to speak and gesticulate, Dante disappeared as though by magic, and the person one saw in his place was a very changeable being. Vidame, though not in the first rank as an actor, was a genuine man of the theatre, gifted with the special imagination of that craft. He knew how, by a movement of hip or shoulder, to reveal meanings which the authors had left undefined. But that gift, so valuable to men of his profession, was spoilt by an all-pervading disdain, which he could not keep in check and which made him turn into derision the plays of all his authors, as we shall presently see. No sooner had he opened his mouth and brought his muscles into play than the director of the Théâtre des Carmes became for a minute, as occasion required, a perfect embodiment of Titus or Caliban. Then, suddenly overleaping all the creatures of his imagination, he came to earth again as Eric Vidame, that is to say, a rather rough type, cynical, grumpy, negligent, peevish, and haunted by vague yearnings.

His real name was Remi Vidame, and that was how he had signed his first youthful efforts. Then he had taken a dislike to the name of Remi, which seemed to him dull. He had substituted that of Eric, whose Scandinavian, or better, Ibsenian resonance was effective in arresting attention.

From the year 1905 Vidame, though still very young, had begun to gather round him a theatrical company, mostly composed of amateurs or wandering actors.

He was at that time preparing pieces which they rehearsed feverishly in a freezingly cold studio situated in a sunless back yard. From time to time Vidame would have the luck to get hold of a theatre for three or four days and would put on his show. At first he had given the troupe the name of 'Comédiens de Saint Jacques' from the fact that their original quarters were in a ramshackle old building in the depths of the Quartier Latin at the beginning of the way followed in olden times by the pilgrims to Compostella. This name finally led to misapprehensions. 'People take us for a religious guild,' grumbled Vidame. 'We shall have to change our title.' And just then, it was about 1910, in one of his walks in the Quartier Maubert he had come upon a shabby old theatre, somewhat difficult of access as it could only be reached by way of a cul-de-sac between mouldering buildings.

It had been used as an assembly room for a masonic lodge, then as a music hall, then as a dance hall. The situation would certainly have discouraged a man of more sober judgment. The house was the property of an elderly woman who was ever ailing, ever on the point of death, and ever tormented with a passion for laying claims. Every now and then she would intervene in financial debates and legal squabbles with a display of obscure documents which she herself was far from understanding. Besides that, she had a tenant, and he, in his turn, had a sub-tenant.

These two people entrenched themselves behind impregnable leases, emerging at odd times to demand money, utter threats, and pour forth complaints. As there was not another theatre available in the whole of Paris at that time, Vidame had, in

spite of everything, installed himself in it in a spirit of wrathful determination. Then he had begun to produce plays and beat to arms. For more than two years the Théâtre des Carmes had been for the critics a subject for friendly chaff, and for the young literary set a retreat from the world, a temple of devotion. Success had come suddenly, in the autumn of 1912. The faint mildewy odour which pervaded that cellar seemed all of a sudden to have captivated the most delicate nostrils. The evil-smelling little streets on the slopes of Sainte-Genève became acquainted of an evening with the rumble of carriages, the prodigious confusion of bottle-necks, and the angry oaths of the traffic police.

Later on throughout the war years Eric Vidame filled various obscure civilian posts, champing the bit and exuding wrath. The war did not interest him in any way. To him it seemed to have been invented by some maleficent powers in order to prevent him from carrying out his plans. When he spoke of it, which was indeed seldom, he referred to it not as a universal catastrophe, but as a dark conspiracy of imbecile forces against the Théâtre des Carmes and its marvellous director.

Then at last the war died of old age, and without losing a moment Vidame had set about reviving the Théâtre des Carmes, and the crowd had immediately found its way back to it again.

The saints who seek to save humanity from its wretchedness meet only with indifference and contempt from the crowd. The prophets who vehemently or suavely disseminate the gifts of wisdom are flouted and scorned. The learned men who wish to initiate unhappy mortals in the greater mysteries are not infrequently clapped into dungeons. Eric Vidame had met during this venture of his with enthusiastic approval and eager devotion. Men of distinguished qualities of heart and mind, such as Emmanuel des Combes, were content to follow in his shadow with the humility of acolytes bearing the flagons and proffering the missal. Did he need money? A team of professors, artists, lawyers, and even political hangers-on, would at a word, at a flick of an eyelid, rush to beat up funds.

Did he need a flat? Four were straightway offered to him at a moment when not a soul in France could find a place to live in. Did he want a car? There would be ten of the swiftest and smartest at his door. He couldn't move without bumping into friends, so much so that he had become incapable of remaining alone for half an hour, and if he was deprived of his usual court he was bored to death. In the eyes of this little spellbound crowd the Théâtre des Carmes was not what it was: a very modest and interesting theatrical enterprise; it was a mysterious temple, one of the supreme sanctuaries of intelligence in peril, an asylum of regeneration and redemption, a germinal cell of the humanity of the future.

• From the year 1920 Vidame could easily have transported his household gods to some fashionable stage on the right bank. But that idea no longer appealed to him. He wished, with a sort of half sullen, half scoffing ill humour, to remain on the selfsame spot where he had had his first success; he wished, until some fresh whim occurred to him, to compel the smart set to come and breathe the fetid air of his tumbledown blind alley.

He was seized with a passion for what he called the problems of pure technique. Should any one be so tactless as to speak to him of the future of the world and the problem of Europe in travail, Vidame pursed his lips and frowned. Why did people bother him with such high-falutin nonsense? What really mattered was to know whether the theatre would be saved by a stage built of galalith, or one fabricated of pure cellulose under a pressure of two hundred and fifty atmospheres. He had invented the scenery made of cork which so wonderfully eliminates stray resonances, and in this connection he made sibylline references to Marcel Proust's famous study. He would say: 'With cork, it's impossible to vocalize, all the overtones are absorbed. Thought remains pure and incisive. Say your speech against a cork lining and you will see at once what it really amounts to. It's an admirable method of stripping it of all but the essentials.' About the same time he had also invented the triple-rotation projector, which gave a light that

had no mercy on superfluous embellishments and artificial trickery. For Eric Vidame only went in for theatrical technique in order to chasten the spirit, his sole object, the spirit, his sole study.

The Théâtre des Carmes was rectangular and inconvenient. Here and there, for acoustical reasons, it had been given a layer of cork and then re-covered with papier mâché. During the work of renovation the building had had to be strengthened with iron girders which the architect found difficult to disguise. Vidame, in anticipation of the researches of the Russian *constructivistes*, had calmly decided that his ironwork should all be left perfectly naked, that it was in the nature of a profession of faith, an act of sincerity, so much so that the audience had the stirring and disquieting sensation of taking its favourite pleasure in a shipbuilding yard or a railway station or an ironworks. Vidame and his faithful followers were fond of talking of 'perpetual flux,' of 'revealed anatomy,' of 'shifting equilibrium,' of 'creative metamorphosis,' and other subtle riddles, interspersed with adroit invocations of Bergson, whose name from minute to minute lit up the discussion like a flash of lightning.

As soon as Vidame's disciples, imbued with the Vidamian gospel, began to spread its message abroad, suddenly the master would disconcertingly jerk the reins, turn sharp about, and go off in another direction, criticizing his ideas of yesterday, now become the ideas of others, with a caustic, pitiless irony which seldom failed of its effect. No matter! Vidame's friends were always immensely impressed, always captivated, always eager to begin again, always shining with blissful faith and ready to perish in this unequal struggle.

As a matter of fact the Vidamian world was a little world in itself, enclosed, circumscribed, made up of three distinct elements: the actors, the authors, and the public; the rest was of merely documentary interest.

Like many professors, men of science, surgeons, and doctors who live in the centre of a school where they exercise their prestige and lose their true perspective of the world, Vidame

had, little by little, assumed the manners of an ill-tempered tyrant. He gave his actors little taps on the cheek that were often not far short of a box on the ears. He had a way all his own of throwing his arms round their necks, or tugging their hair, or giving them a mild kick in the pants. It was all done in such a style that the object of these somewhat risky attentions could not allow himself to show resentment, so that the only thing to do was to blush with embarrassed delight. But in speech Vidame, skilful juggler with words as he was, could give that free play to his daring which he could not allow himself in action. He had a special way of his own of insulting his collaborators, particularly the older ones who had been associated with him from the beginning, of bringing home to them in three words their ignorance, their clumsiness, their lack of skill, and above all their faults of taste, for with Vidame taste was the mighty word, and according to Paris, the Théâtre des Carmes was the one and only place where taste and competent critical judgment were still to be found.

The war had played great havoc with the little theatrical company. One of Vidame's youngest actors had been killed in 1915 in the attacks on the Champagne front. Paul Helloun, for three years a prisoner, had contracted a painful kidney and bladder trouble, a disability which was a constant worry to him if he had to remain any length of time on the stage. Farge had a stiff wrist and a much damaged hand. Others, too, had fought, toiled, and suffered in various places. But they never talked of the war. The *patron* didn't like it. If Helloun, during a rehearsal, began to feel uncomfortable and fidget on his feet Vidame would say indulgently: 'Oh, go along with you, my poor old Paul,' and almost before he was out of earshot the director would add: 'He's really very trying! Pity, you know! Such a nice old thing!'

For all the women of his troupe the *patron* had a sort of bantering politeness, which on ordinary occasions was a dulcet murmur, but in moments of tension rose to a sort of hiss. He did not employ the familiar *tutoiement* except when congratulating them, so that the praise thereby lost some of its force.

He would put his arm round a waist with an air of blasé casualness, or snatch at a bare arm and slide a stealthy hand towards the arm-pit. To emphasize a criticism he would lay the tip of his forefinger here or there on the fabric of a dress. If he was very pleased, which was not often, he dropped a kiss on a fair wrist. He marched into all the dressing-rooms without knocking. That was his privilege, his own way of claiming his feudal rights. He would seat himself astride a rickety chair and light a cigarette with a weary, worried air, and there he would remain for hours talking about nothing in particular. When this semblance of conversation at last died down, he would begin to look like Dante, and the more intelligent actresses realized at that moment that the *patron* had talked himself out and hadn't a thought in his head, not even of *marivaudage*.

He was fond of coming and installing himself thus in Suzanne's dressing-room. As the room was very small, by stretching out his arm he could explore in every direction with a sort of cool impudence. Suzanne, drawing back with a clatter of her chair, would exclaim:

'Please let me get my things off. I've barely an hour to snatch some dinner and a breath of air.'

Vidame would withdraw, but not without pauses and turns. No longer was he ironical but rather pitiful and even incoherent. Forcing his naturally deep and vibrant voice into an almost languishing falsetto, he would repeat:

'Little Suzanne, little Suzanne.'

At another time he would make a sham exit, only to return the next moment and start talking about the theatre, the public, and especially the authors. During these rambling monologues he was in no concern to obtain an intelligent response, all he wanted was to avoid the feeling of solitude; he could only think out loud and in the presence of somebody.

As a matter of fact he only admired about a dozen masterpieces which he kept in reserve to produce later on when his doctrine was brought to perfection. His personal preference was for plays with a minimum of fixed dialogue the *commedia*

dell' arte, and especially the Japanese *No* plays. He conceded talent to dramatists in proportion to the extent to which they eschewed what at the Théâtre des Carmes was scornfully referred to as '*matière oratoire*,' oratorical content. Occasionally he would give the greatest praise to a play that had recently been discovered. If the success of the play justified this verdict, and particularly if the success threatened to endure, he would begin to show some uneasiness. He would say to his familiars: 'The play is good, of course, or we shouldn't have put it on. It's good, but we mustn't exaggerate. We must consider how it's built. Nothing more instructive than to rehearse a play and then give it fifty performances. No better way of pulling it to pieces.'

Ever since his youth he had dreamt of building a theatre in which to perform his own plays. But the years were passing and Vidame, with infinite concern which he confessed to no one, sometimes asked himself if he would ever be able to achieve the quiet concentration necessary in order to exercise his full capabilities and compose his masterpiece.

He was now producing Noël Chérouvier's *Mirabeau*, a play this elderly writer had preserved like a mummy for thirty years in a drawer. The director of the Théâtre des Carmes would declare to his listeners: 'This play is only of value in so far as it is revolutionary, taking the word in its political sense. As for art, better say nothing about it.' Sometimes he would even go further on this delicate ground. 'I'm grateful,' he would say, 'to Chérouvier for never having deserted the spiritual values. He is incorruptible, and that is rare in these unhappy times. He attacks the ultra-nationalists but he keeps at a respectful distance from the Bolsheviks, and that's what I call taking a stand on spiritual values. Chérouvier is a man with a conscience. . .'

Vidame would pause in thought for a moment and then continue, producing from his larynx the marvellous sonorities of a double bassoon:

'Chérouvier is the only one of our elders to whom I can truly say: "*Mon cher maître*." Oh, mind you, not for his

work, which is terribly boring, but for his attitude of fine indifference during the war. . . . He's certainly not a great artist, but he is a conscience, a character, and character, I can say with confidence, is a thousand times more rare than talent. I know what I'm talking about. . . .'

Thereupon he would send for the booking sheets and would run over them with much raising and lowering of his eyebrows.

'I don't care a damn for the public,' he would say from time to time. 'It's our first duty not to care a damn for the public. Wait; don't misunderstand my words—they mean that it's our duty to impose on the crowd our way of thinking because it is the best, and our taste because it alone is right.'

Thus spake Eric Vidame. Nevertheless on the nights of dress rehearsals he would be wandering about in the wings with livid face and clammy hands. Every five minutes he would dispatch someone into the auditorium and inquire in anguished tones:

'What's going on there, at the back. They look like stuffed dummies. . . . What is Thingumbob saying? What is What's-his-name up to?'

On ordinary occasions he was wont to declare:

'I don't care a damn about money. I am here to serve the spirit.'

And yet if the booking sheet revealed too many blanks he began to despair and talk of hunting up the old friends of the Théâtre des Carmes, the capitalists.

When the conversation on all these pathetic themes had gone on long enough, Eric Vidame would fall into a kind of torpor. Then he began to look like Dante and his familiars understood they had best leave him alone, for he was about to doze off.

III

'SUZANNE,' said Eric Vidame, 'are you going to hate me if I tell you that you will probably never play Cordelia?'

Suzanne Pasquier did not make any immediate reply. She had just slipped on the sleeves of a loose linen wrapper. With

the motherly assistance of Mme Charlemagne she was removing the powdered curls of Queen Marie-Antoinette. Suddenly the small neat head emerged with its own fair hair tied back with a fawn-coloured ribbon. The features of the face were pure and clear-cut; even under the make-up the complexion remained transparent and the life within endowed these delicate marvels with a quivering vitality; but neither the structure, nor the colouring, nor the magical mobility of this fair face could account for its extraordinarily harmonious and appealing beauty. The girl stole a glance at Eric Vidame and began to smile.

'Oh,' she said softly, 'possibly you have never noticed that we too, we others, poor creatures that we are, have a kind of intelligence of our own.'

'And what, Suzon, does that obscure little speech imply?'

'First of all, don't call me Suzon. I am Suzon only for my dearest friends.'

'And I am not one of those.'

'You are our chief, you are not always my friend, not very often my friend. Yes, we too have our intelligence of a kind, and when you are setting out to say something subtly disagreeable, you never seem to guess how well aware of it I am.'

'Well then, my poor friend, you're quite off the track. You will never play Cordelia for the simple reason that we shall not be putting on *King Lear*.'

Vidame lowered his voice, bent his head, and said, with a wave of his cigarette towards the nearest wall.

'It's that old ass of a Helloun who's still kidding himself that we are going to play *Lear*, and that I'm going to give him, of all people, *Lear* to play. Now I ask you. . .'

Marie-Antoinette's rouge and black patch had suddenly disappeared. Suzanne had untied her hair in order to comb it through. She turned right round to face the man she called the *patron* and opened wide those crystal-clear eyes of hers.

'I shall not die,' she said, 'without having played Cordelia. Even if I have to play it for myself alone in a cellar.'

Vidame clapped his hands two or three times

'Splendid, Suzanne! I'll give you at least three curtain calls for that astounding declaration'

'I trust,' snapped the girl, suddenly flushing with fury, 'I trust you're not upset by the idea that we small fry are capable of appreciating and admiring something.'

'What you're saying is extremely offensive, madame.'

'Your friend Emmanuel des Combes said to me one day after a performance: "The glory of your profession is the privilege you enjoy of hobnobbing with masterpieces." I have often thought of that since. Oh, the phrase doesn't err on the side of generosity; it puts us neatly in our place. But I think of it every day and I take pleasure in it. I'm not like you, a superior mind. But I do adore my work.'

She smiled suddenly, turned away her head, and murmured:

'I was going to say I do adore my art. I couldn't say it because you were looking at me with your ironical air. I loathe that ironical air.'

'You're quite mistaken, Lady Percy, my only feeling was one of admiration.'

Suzanne flushed quickly.

'If we are going to put on *Henry IV* after Chérouvier's play, you might at least have the grace to let me know in good time.'

'You're in a mighty hurry, Suzanne. You want to learn the part?'

'Believe me, I know it. How can I remind you without seeming to boast that I have by heart Ophelia and Monime, Marguerite and Mélisande, Portia and Kitty Bell? . . . Fifty roles at the very least.'

'Quite, quite,' murmured Vidame. 'But I sometimes wonder if you have ever stopped and given yourself time to know Suzanne by heart . . . I mean Suzanne Pasquier. . . .'

And when the girl, taken aback, stared at him in astonishment, he went on in coaxing tones:

"How now, Kate! I must leave you within these two hours."

Suzanne had just risen, and with perfect naturalness she took Vidame's hand and went on eagerly with the scene:

'O, my good lord, why are you thus alone?
For what offence have I thus fortnight been
A banished woman from my Harry's bed?
Tell me, sweet lord, what is 't that takes from thee
Thy stomach, pleasure, and thy golden sleep?'

Vidame threw away his cigarette and nodded gently.
'Eh, eh!' he breathed, 'not bad, not at all bad, Suzanne.'
The girl's thoughts drifted away. A little later she said in a gentle whisper:

'For since you love me not,
I will not love myself.'

'But, my little Suzanne,' said Vidame flippantly, 'I still love you.'

Suzanne recoiled with a hasty movement.

'Don't break the flow,' she warned him, 'or I shall tell you I hate you.'

'It looks to me, Suzon, as if you no longer respected your chief.'

'I no longer respect you when you cease to respect yourself'

'Decidedly you are obsessed by Lady Percy.'

'I like her, she pleases me. I love Olivia, I love both Portias, the one in *The Merchant of Venice* and the one in *Julius Caesar*. I adore these women of Shakespeare, who are beautiful and magnificent. I believe I would give two years of my life to play Lady Percy.'

'Two years of which life, mademoiselle? Two years of your lovely young life or two years of the woman you will become in half a century?'

'Don't! Don't! I shan't be alive in half a century. Be quiet! If you speak again of such ghastly possibilities I shall detest you!'

'You may possibly play Lady Percy.'

'Possibly? And why only possibly?'

Vidame rose and gave his chair a twirl.

'I'm not asking you for two years of your life, but merely for two brief hours, charming little Suzanne.'

'You're hateful!'

'Let's talk seriously, Suzanne Pasquier. It's not at all certain that you could play Lady Percy.'

'And why not, monseigneur?'

'It's a very small part, Kate. If you were not to play this small part—much too small, obviously, for a person of your distinction—I should be the first to regret it, but don't forget, mon amie, that I should be Hotspur. So come, I'll pray heaven to send me lots of money.'

'You must admit,' said Suzanne bitterly, 'that you take a positive delight in torturing those who serve you.'

Vidame shrugged his shoulders.

'I will pray heaven that it may be in my power to give you the small part of Lady Percy. And thus I shall have the good fortune to hold you for a few seconds in my arms. You remember, Kate, for the scene of farewell: "My horse, my love, my horse"'

'Oh,' she replied, with a sigh and a droop of the shoulders, 'you know quite well, my lord, that kisses on the stage have no effect on a single fibre of one's being. But, honestly, tell me, who could prevent me from playing Lady Percy? It entirely rests with you: you are the master, I believe.'

Vidame opened the door and made as if to leave without replying. Then he came back and said in worried tones:

'No, not a bit of it, little Suzanne. It depends on all sorts of obscure forces which I hate to speak of. In any case, put it out of your head, Suzanne. We're very far from it. We must first of all get rid of this wooden *Mirabeau*, about which I sometimes ask myself what on earth it all means. Adieu, Lady Percy.'

IV

As he was rather short, Hellouin wore high heels and tried further to rectify this defect of nature by stretching his back muscles and stiffening his neck. With forefinger pointing to the carpet, arm outstretched, and voice full of pained and noble feeling, he exclaimed:

'Et s'il faut qu'à mes feux votre flamme réponde,
(Que vous doit importer tout le reste du monde?)'

Célimène remained silent and turned away her head. Alceste took a step forward, trying to get the girl to meet his eye, and murmured in almost suppliant tones:

'Vos désirs avec moi ne sont-ils pas contents?'

Célimène drew back and replied, weighing her words

'La solitude effraye une âme de vingt ans. . . '

There was a silence, long, much too long doubtless, for Hellouin began to tap with his foot.

'Go on, go on, Suzon. Don't stop after that line, my dear. You know, she's still talking about her soul. So you must keep it all in the same flow:

'Tra-la-la, pa-ta-boum, assez fielle assez forte

Vingt dieux! I've lost it. I can't remember. You ought to keep your script in hand, Suzon, you're going to throw me off my stride.'

Célimène had just opened an imaginary fan. She fluttered it twice or thrice and said with a shake of the head:

'I don't need your old script. I know it all perfectly well. I was dreaming, just dreaming.'

'Well, don't dream, Suzon. Three minutes more and we've done. Go back again if you don't mind; be an angel. I'll start again.

'Et s'il faut qu'à mes feux . . . '

Suzanne replied in the role of Célimène, and then a little further on took up the cues of Éliante, and even of Philinte. Hellouin had warmed up in the course of the scene, for he was in love with his work. A little brownish froth showed at the corners of his mouth. Sweat ran down his temples and cheeks. As he thrust the script into his pocket he said:

'Not a word to the *patron*, little girl. First of all because he doesn't like our playing outside the theatre. Oh, I don't say he isn't right, since it's a matter of principle with him. . . . And then too, he has forbidden me to play Alceste. Yes, my dear, that's how he is. He has actually forbidden me to play the part. It's not because I'm too short and too stout. No, as to that, I'm absolutely right for Alceste. But he

considers it isn't my style. Now, Suzanne, about most things he's usually right, I won't deny it. But when it comes to me, I don't think he knows me; he misjudges me. Now that reminds me, listen. . . .'

'Hellouin,' said Suzanne, pointing to the door, 'I told you beforehand that I'd only got an hour, no more, and now someone's coming to fetch me. . . .'

'Right, I'm off. . . . But just a word while I slip into my overcoat, just one word, little girl. Can you guess what he's done, the "cher maître," the incorruptible one, you know, the illustrious author of *Mirabeau*?'

'Hellouin, be off, old boy, or you need never ask me again to rehearse with you.'

'Well, he's cut off his beard. Yes, my dear, M Chérouvier has cut off his beard. It's a universal sensation throughout the fifth arrondissement. His beard! Now he will be able to bestow locks of it on his faithful disciples. Ah, Suzon, you're a good little pal, my dear. I shall be able to play *Le Misanthrope* at Beauvais, the day when our theatre does that piece of Potteraux's in which I'm not playing. On Tuesday, eh what! And if you don't breathe a word the *patron* will never know. Now about my *Alceste*; pretty good, eh? Not so bad, eh? Yes, yes, all right, I'm off.'

Suzanne was gently edging the good fellow towards the door. But just as he was actually through it, he paused again, clinging with his nails to the doorway, and declared with a serious face:

'But I'm devoted to Vidame. That's how things are. Even when he makes me sweat blood. And so are you, Suzon, though you always pretend to be so stand-offish with him. . . .'

'Now will you shut up?' said the girl irritably.

'Well, some day I'll tell you what you really think of the *patron*.'

'I fancy I know that better than you do.'

He was on the landing and had just taken hold of the banister rail. He shook his head slowly.

'No, no, little one, you don't know it better than I do. . . .'

The end of the sentence was cut off by a bang. Suzanne had slammed the door.

She crossed the hall, then the little sitting-room with its window overlooking the *quai*, the river, the Île Saint-Louis, the whole town, and the skies of Paris. For a few minutes Suzanne remained standing with an air of uncertainty, almost of helplessness. Then she walked a few steps forward and went into her bedroom, sat down in front of the dressing-table, and gazed into the mirror with an anxious, eager, almost condemnatory eye. Presently she was startled to find herself saying aloud:

'La solitude effraye une âme de vingt ans'

She began to count on her fingers thoughtfully. twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three . . . and so on to twenty-nine. Then she shuddered slightly. Was it possible? She was actually twenty-nine! No, it was quite impossible. Never could she have believed that some day she would actually be twenty-nine years old. Nine years older than Célimène, the young widow!

Suzanne shook her head in denial. Out of those twenty-nine years there were four, nearly five, years of war. You couldn't really count war years. Then, too, Molière must have been mistaken. He had written 'vingt ans' for the sake of the metre, it's hardly possible to make 'vingt-neuf ans' scan. And besides, in Molière's time, women were considered old by the time they were thirty. It was a convention of the period. Célimène, it was clear enough, didn't speak or write like a girl of twenty, but like a mature woman.

Suzanne turned towards the mirror a long, pleading look; then, little by little, she began to smile. She was lovely, marvellously lovely. And this was no personal opinion, mere conceit and empty vanity. The entire Parisian press acclaimed Suzanne's radiant beauty. Her clear blue eyes, with their lids from which not one lash was missing, those eyes which according to the hour and the mood passed with an access of shimmering warmth from forget-me-not to periwinkle blue, those eyes were known all over Paris, as the biggest, the

strangest, and the sweetest ever seen! Not a wrinkle, not a line on those firm yet delicate cheeks. The nose, straight, exquisitely winged, seemed modelled of some fine, transparent, precious material. The mouth . . . yes, the mouth . . .

She opened her mouth, turning her head slightly so as to make her teeth shine in the better light from the window. The flesh of her neck was soft and supple. No, no, that wasn't the neck-line of a woman of twenty-nine. Here and there there were delicate curves which still recalled the very young girl. Suzanne made an effort to frown, then smiled with a sort of pout, then raised her round and mobile shoulders, and then, to wind up, gave a light, stealthy, joyous laugh. Yes, yes, yes, she was young and lovely, younger and more beautiful, more attractive, more surely Suzanne than ever.

At that moment she heard the parquet creak behind her. Above her own image, in the darkness of the mirror, another figure emerged. Without turning round, as though still held by the spell of her self-contemplation, she said:

'How did you get in, Philippe?'

'Why, I knocked,' replied the young man, 'and your servant came and opened the door. I've been waiting there at the open door for at least ten minutes. I couldn't help seeing you. I coughed, I even said your name, and I quite thought you had seen me, had realized I was there. I wasn't being indiscreet, since I am your painter in ordinary, your eye-witness, your spectator *ex officio*.'

He laughed silently and continued:

'You have been gracious enough to notice my presence. Do I have to apologize?'

She rose to her feet and shivered from head to foot. In fact, she seemed dazed: she moved a step or two like a sleep-walker and put out groping hands towards the young man, who grasped them tenderly.

'Truly you are never so much at ease,' he said earnestly, 'as when you are in your own company. Never so unconstrained as with yourself. One is almost ashamed to interrupt the conversation.'

He added, with a vague gesture towards the far spaces:

'I came up by myself. I believe this is the time you start, if you happen to be walking. You know I walk quite well now and for quite a long stretch, in spite of this wound. At home I can go the whole round of the woods I never get tired.'

Suzanne had put on her hat and thrown a coat over her shoulders; still silent, she was selecting a pair of gloves from a drawer. The young man went over to the window.

'If you 'll allow me I 'll come here some day and sketch or paint what I can see from your windows. It's quite lovely. Even if I only painted that wide sky and, down there, all those smoke wreaths and that long narrow cloud like a canoe.'

'Did you know,' said Suzanne, 'that this used to be my brother Laurent's flat? He had to give it up because he found it was too small when they had their first child. But for me, for a woman living alone . . .'

'I don't know your brother Laurent, except from the pictures in the papers; but I've met your brother Joseph, since he is our neighbour and one of the lords of Nesles, if you please!'

Suzanne laughed.

'One must try to understand Joseph. He amuses me. He's awful. If he didn't make me laugh I should be horrified at him. I shall be ready in half a second. A woman always has to waste a little time before she starts out, so as to make sure of forgetting something. And now please open the door I was speaking about Joseph. Do you know what he said to me the other day when he was crabbing Laurent? No, you 'll never guess. He does admire Laurent, but he's full of jealousy, full of arrogance and boastfulness. As for us, that is to say Laurent, Cécile, and myself, he would like to prove to us that we are what he calls creatures of luxury, and he alone, the money-maker . . . But I see that you want to hear what he had to say about Laurent. He didn't actually mention Laurent. He was speaking of savants in general, of this "crew" of savants. And suddenly he exclaimed: "Pasteur

is looked upon as a benefactor to humanity because he saved so many lives. Result, the nations became too numerous and had to cut each other's throats for four years and a half in order to restore equilibrium, and kill fifteen million men, those very fifteen million whom Pasteur had saved. That's what the scientists are. scourges of humanity. While we, the business men, the money-makers, the givers of plenty . . . " Oh, and lots more of the same kind. Don't you think that's quaint? Philippe, Philippe, you're the one who's asleep now.'

'No, no,' said the young man. 'No, I wasn't asleep. I was looking at that lock of hair, golden, almost red, that lock that will never stay with the rest. Wait a moment, Suzanne. I can very well call you Suzanne, since there are thousands of people in Paris who refer to you like that, just as if you belonged to them.'

'And you're jealous, perhaps?'

'No, not jealous. I have my share. Wait a second. Wait there, in the light of the window, before going downstairs. Give me time to say good-bye.'

'What? Are you going to leave me?'

'Good-bye until to-morrow.'

'Aren't you coming with me as far as the theatre?'

'Oh, yes, we shall be coming with you. Now don't move, Suzanne dear.'

'I really don't understand. You said "we."'

'Oh, I shall be seeing you this afternoon, and possibly during the whole evening. But I want to say good-bye to this moment of being alone with you. For "they" are waiting for us downstairs.'

'Who can be waiting for us downstairs?'

'I'll tell you directly. But when they are there, all three of them, sharing you with me, and admiring you also, then I shall no longer be alone. That's why I want to say good-bye to all those gracious things which I so delight in. Good-bye, little ear which the light of the window edges with silvery pink. Good-bye, blue-tinted vein traversing the brow from

north to south like an elusive fancy. Good-bye to Suzanne's mouth, more exquisitely drawn than the ideal mouth of an angel in a picture of Perugino's. Good-bye, teeth which seem made not to eat or laugh with but to light the traveller down the darkness of these accursed stairs, whose two last flights will be all too quickly descended. Let us go, since you are in a hurry.'

Suzanne made as if to go back again.

'No,' she said, smiling. 'No, I don't have to hurry. I rather like listening to you saying all these thousands of wild charming things to me. But who is waiting for us downstairs?'

"You'll soon see. But don't go down too quickly. I haven't said all I wanted to say to you to-day. I would like to sketch you and paint you every day. That would be fame enough for me. Do you know that Rembrandt painted his wife, Henrietta Jaghers, over and over again? Sometimes she would be Bathsheba, sometimes Susannah bathing, and sometimes a princess. And yet she was far from being a beauty, that poor Henrietta. As for you, I could paint you all my life long, even if you were only Suzanne. But yesterday you were Monime, to-morrow you'll be Marie-Antoinette, and the day after to-morrow Cordelia or Andromaque, or Ophelia or who knows what? Bérénice perhaps. Yes, I'm very fortunate.'

'But,' put in Suzanne with a laugh, 'I'm not your wife.'

'True,' replied the young man. 'Only too true. But why remind me of that, Suzanne? I was almost on the point of forgetting it. Oh, so we're going down? You know there are three of them down there?'

'Whom do you mean? Who are down there?'

'Two of my brothers and one of my sisters. Three Baudoins. So that there will be four of us to escort you to the theatre to-day, if you'll allow us.'

V

'Oh,' exclaimed Suzanne, 'how very much alike you all are!'

She took a step, half closing her eyes, then went on more quietly.

'No! That is to say . . . no! Wait till I can get a good look at you. You are all very different when one gets a nearer view of you. But you are still very much alike because you are not in the least like the others, people of other families, any other people. Who is this young lady? Come, Philippe, introduce us!'

Three young people were standing on the pavement, and Philippe said laconically:

'One of my sisters, two of my brothers. I've already told you about them'

'But their names? Tell me their names. Give me their Christian names.'

'This is Thérèse. She comes just after me, though I'm not actually the eldest, since there is Madeleine. Here is Thérèse Baudoin. She is a year younger than I am.'

Suzanne put out her hand and Thérèse bent her knee in an imperceptible curtsy, proud and dignified, which the actress in Suzanne greatly admired.

'And what does your sister Thérèse do in the famous village of Nesles?'

Thérèse replied with great simplicity:

'I help my mother, I cook, I fetch water from the well. I sew, I embroider, and then . . .'

'And then?'

The girl flushed, smiled gently, and said:

'I also read aloud to my father, sing, dance, and play the viola.'

'You dance?' exclaimed Suzanne delightedly. 'Did you go to training classes? Who was your teacher?'

The girl shook her head in some embarrassment.

'Mother was my teacher, and even father, before . . . before the war.'

Wait! wait!' broke in one of the two brothers, a tall lad with long curly hair and a big voice that was at once gruff and boyish. 'Wait, she hasn't told you all the things she can do. She knows how to salt butter, make black-currant jam and mulberry syrup, find morels in the spring, and look after the bees. And yet look at her hands. They're delicate and well cared for. She has a bent thumb, like all the Baudouins. And now I haven't told you all. No, no, I haven't told you anything like all.'

'And who is this one?' inquired Suzanne, turning to Philippe. Philippe shrugged his shoulders and replied, with a laugh. 'A madman, as you can see.'

'What!' expostulated the long-haired youth, shaking his head, 'do you mean to say you don't know me? It's incredible! I'll put on my glasses and you'll recognize me. Now what do you see before you when you are on the stage? All those staring faces with gaping mouths and goggling eyes. Don't you know that they're us? All those hands that go on applauding when the rest are tired? Us again. And you don't recognize us? What callous indifference! What egotism!'

'Hubert! Hubert!' scolded the elder brother.

'And this one who doesn't say a word, what's his name?' inquired Suzanne.

The youth with the flowing locks was shaken with glee.

'That one,' he declaimed in lugubrious tones. 'Oh, that one's our mute, the silent character in the piece. His name is Marc, but I call him "Still Waters" or sometimes "Infinite Space" on account of his everlasting silence, as Pascal calls it.'

'Hubert!' said the blushing youth, 'I shall end by speaking if you go on like that!'

'Don't say anything, beloved Space, don't forsake your natural element. Look, madame. No, not madame . . . mademoiselle. No, I shall say our Suzanne, plainly and roundly like a plum. Just look at my brother the mute, look at that placid carp of a brother of mine. There are people who

deny the existence of the soul. That's because they've never examined the ears of my beloved Marc by transmitted light. They're very big, those ears. But by transmitted light you can see them turn red under the influence of thought, that is to say of the soul. And there you are! What do you suppose he's thinking about, the dear boy, for his ears to betray him by turning red? It's not a reflex phenomenon, beloved Suzanne. It's precisely a manifestation of thought. Perhaps he's thinking of the star Antares, or just simply about you, like the rest of us. Am I walking too fast? With our long legs we probably do walk too fast.'

'No, you're not walking too fast,' said Suzanne, 'but you don't give me a chance of asking a single question.'

'I'm replying in advance to any question you could think of.'

'That is something you can't possibly know,' replied Suzanne with a laugh.

'He's a plague,' groaned Philippe. 'He talks and talks and there's no way of stopping him. I warned you, he's a madman.'

'What's your profession, Monsieur Hubert?' inquired Suzanne, pausing a moment in the midst of her escort.

'Philippe's already told you, I am a madman.'

'Right! But what else?'

'I'm a millionaire.'

'A millionaire?'

'Certainly. And why not? I have a million ideas, a million plans, a million desires. Besides, everybody's got a million of something or other. We are all unrecognized millionaires. I am in possession of billions of red corpuscles, billions of molecules, millions of extraordinary thoughts, and a million destinies to choose from.'

'Oh,' broke in the silent Marc. 'Don't pay too much attention to him. He's more sensible than he sounds.'

'What do you know about it, Interplanetary Space?'

'But you haven't yet told me what your profession is,' said Suzanne.

'My profession? I am a botanist, at your service, Suzanne,

dear Yes, there are only two things in this world that I really care for: botany and love. Yes, yes, don't you deny it, you others. I love love, as St. Augustine said. I love love, but mind, I'm not sentimental. Good! I nearly bumped my head against that lamp post, and there stand the four of you, and not a hand stretched out to save me. . . . Excuse me, I'm short-sighted. I'll explain to you some other time that I'm short-sighted in order to see things better.'

'You'll no longer be able to stop him,' said Philippe, smiling. 'He goes on saying anything that comes into his head.'

'I say anything that comes into my head and it turns out to be something worth saying. Now, when are you coming to Nesles?'

'Oh, I shall certainly come to Nesles, but I must first get clear of this awful theatre.'

'Then you'll never come,' said Thérèse, with a shake of her head.

'Oh, it's ages,' exclaimed the young madman excitedly, 'it's months since Philippe began to tell us you were coming. But Philippe goes on bragging of it and at last I lose patience. You've already missed the snowdrops.'

'Did I promise to come for the snowdrops?'

'You promised me to come before the Christmas roses. Don't you remember you promised me when you were playing in *Andromaque*?'

'Oh,' exclaimed Hubert in pathetic tones, '*Andromaque*! That was top-hole, if you like.'

He stopped suddenly, knelt down on the pavement, flung back his head, and began to declaim, imitating Suzanne:

Ah! de quel souvenir viens-tu frapper mon âme!
Quoi! Céphise, j'ai vu mourir encor
Ce fils, ma seule joie, et l'image d'Hector!

'Bravo!' cried the girl. 'So you know some lines by heart.'

'Why, I know millions of lines. I've already told you I'm a millionaire. And when I can't remember them I just invent them and that's almost as good. All the same, you missed the snowdrops.'

'And then you missed the forsythias,' added Thérèse.

'What do you call forsythias?'

'A golden bush which flowers in the winter to take the place of the sun.'

'And that 's not all,' murmured Marc.

He blushed again, and when everybody stared at him he stammered in a choking voice:

'The daffodils . . .'

'What, did I miss the daffodils?' said Suzanne gaily; 'but what are daffodils?'

'They 're the yellow flowers the English call by that name because it 's their way of pronouncing asphodels, but they 're not asphodels.'

'Look out!' said Hubert, lifting a monitory finger to the skies. 'Look out! She 's on the point of missing the narcissi.'

'Oh, cried Suzanne, bowing her head in pretended contrition, 'if you go on like this I shall indeed feel guilty.'

'Suzanne dear,' broke in Philippe, 'we are only so disappointed that you should miss so many sweet and charming things that hold a big place in the life of us country folk. Don't miss our orchids'

'You grow orchids?'

'Oh, no, I 'm speaking of our wild orchids, of those marvellous little orchids which grow in the woods of Nesles and La Tour-du-Lay. Come. Come, and I 'll tell you the story of the renanthera, as it was told to me by our botanist.'

'Oh, if you 're going to tell my stories . . .!'

'And what is this renanthera? Alas, you make me realize how ignorant I am.'

'The renanthera,' said Thérèse, 'is not a native flower'

'No,' continued Philippe, 'it comes from Brazil. It grows in the crevices of trees where a little moss or dust has collected. When one wants to grow it one plants it at the foot of a tree, in the earth, in the humus. It forms roots and then shoots up into the tree. When it is strong enough, when it has made other roots here and there in the crevices of the tree, it leaves

the ground, sheds its earthly roots, and takes flight—you hear me, Suzanne?—up and away like a creature set free.’

‘Mon Dieu!’ murmured Suzanne, ‘what lovely stories you can tell! Thank you for the renanthera. What a pity! we’re already there. Here we are already at my theatre.’

‘Oh,’ said Hubert. ‘We know the way. I have only to follow my hat, it comes straight here. Anyhow I haven’t a hat.’

‘You don’t know, do you,’ said Philippe, ‘that they were all three at the performance yesterday with father and mother?’

‘So as to say farewell to Monime, as it was the last night Father very seldom comes to Paris, as you can understand.’

‘Yes, and do you know what he said when you came on to the stage? He said . . . You tell her, Philippe’

Philippe shook his head.

‘What’s the good?’ he said ‘It’s something special to ourselves, something a little difficult and queer, like much that concerns us.’

‘Well, then, I’m going to tell you,’ broke in Hubert. He said: “She’s very beautiful.”’

‘But,’ said Suzanne, slightly astonished, ‘but . . .’

‘Yes, yes,’ replied the madcap, ‘you’re wondering how he can feel beauty when he’s blind. But I understand quite easily. He can feel the presence of beauty just by the breathing of the people round him’

‘No, no,’ murmured Thérèse, ‘it’s something more subtle than that. . . Now you will excuse us; mademoiselle, we’re delighted to have been able to walk down with you and we shall look forward to your visit to Nesles, where every one is awaiting you.’

‘Oh, I shall come,’ said Suzanne. ‘I feel as if a visit to Nesles would be like touching earth, would purify me, be a source of fresh strength and courage. Now let me thank all my escort.’

She was beginning to move off down the dingy alley leading to the theatre. Philippe took three or four steps, caught her up quickly, and said in a low voice:

'I shall paint you also, later on, in the grey light of the morning. And I shall paint you in the sunshine, in the full July sunshine. And I shall paint you in the dusk when one can only see shadows. And I shall paint you thousands of times before I've seen and expressed everything. Good-bye, Suzanne, until to-night.'

VI

THE stage of the Théâtre des Carmes was provided with what in the language of this particular theatre were called 'various applications of fixed architecture.' That meant that there were two sets of stairs which rose from the stage to the upper regions of the theatre, regions which in any case were out of sight of the audience. One of these staircases rose from the back of the stage and went up to the flies. The other started almost at the proscenium and went towards the internal partition wall which separated the artists' quarters from the few rooms kept for the use of the managerial staff.

The two staircases, which were fairly good imitations of marble, were in reality made of a newly discovered plastic substance, which was incombustible, sound-proof, and according to the experts combined the properties of cellulose with those of rubber. Vidame made much of its being sound-proof.

'The most important thing is to be safe from outside noises,' he would declare. 'The king can be dying in front of the stage, delivering the sublimest sentiments under his breath, and in the meantime I can bring in all the English army by one staircase and all the rebel troops by the other. Now if those stairs were made of pitch pine, one would have to bellow on the stage on account of the clatter of boots on the stairs. There, you see, completely sound-proof scenic material is the first requisite for a well-organized art of the stage.'

It sometimes happened that an ingenuous critic would hazard a few remarks on the 'applications of fixed architecture.' He might say, for instance:

'But, monsieur, isn't it rather odd to see the English army arriving by a staircase?'

Eric Vidame had ceased long ago to reply to such questions. With suddenly wide-open dreamy eyes he would contemplate the blunderer in silence, he would gaze over the blunderer's head, right through the blunderer towards the infinite depths of the future. What was the use of replying to such ignorance? Vidame had in the past fought enough battles over all these problems. In those days he had declared:

'Flights of stairs bring in the principle of differing levels. They permit of the multiplication of planes on which the dramatic action can unfold. Instead of playing on the flat in two dimensions of space, our theatre can now live in the three dimensions of that space and even, since time is a factor in all dramatic art, it can be said to be a universe of four dimensions that we animate with our speech. Very well. Notice moreover that stairs are in a way an important part of human life. There are stairs in every house, in every palace. A ship, perhaps you'll say: a ship! Well, on a ship don't you find stairs at every turn? In towns? In public places? There are stairs in almost all famous towns. Ah, yes, take my word for it, stairs are not only of philosophic and symbolic importance, but more often than not they are a structural feature, an element of realism. . .'

But later on there had certainly been a number of occasions when, unfortunately, the two famous staircases of cellulose-ebonite were hard to account for, for instance when the scene represented a forest, as in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, or a beach, as at the beginning of *L'Échange*. Vidame had then just shrugged his shoulders, saying testily:

'Bah! They'll get used to them. They'll damn well have to get used to them.'

'They' were the legendary multitudes who were to find instruction and salvation through their contact with the miracles of the modern theatre. And the strangest thing of all is that, conformably to his prophecy, 'they' had ended by getting used to Eric Vidame's pair of staircases. To say that

they had ended by getting used to them is really not correct. The docile herd had not 'ended' there, rather it was almost there that they had begun. At once they had understood that if a scene represented 'fields at the end of winter,' as is stated in Act I of *Tête d'or*, a couple of staircases of sound-proof material and marmoreal appearance are absolutely the thing for giving the right optical illusion. The well-trained audiences never uttered the slightest protest against the presence of stairs on Macbeth's blasted heath, or in the landscape familiar to the peasants in *Don Juan*. The *dramatis personae* in all the plays produced at the Théâtre des Carmes had been able, thanks to the two fixed staircases, to move and have their being in all the dimensions of space, and the public, after having acquired a 'habit,' had quite quickly felt a 'need'. Any play which did not include the celebrated 'psychological and emotional difference of levels' was adjudged by the fervent followers of the theatre to be somewhat lacking in warmth and wit. Eric Vidame began to get irritated at this. He would say to his intimate circle:

'The staircase is fundamental, that's understood. But that doesn't mean that any nitwit can come along and demand the staircase when we have reasons for not using it. We shall have to teach those blighters a lesson. As I am going to produce *Chatterton* I shall cut out the business of the staircase. Kitty Bell won't crash down the stairs. She'll fall out of her chair, which is much more natural. I am the master here until further notice, and I won't stand any damn nonsense.'

The two staircases therefore remained solid and irremovable on the stage of the Théâtre des Carmes like a reversible challenge: they were used unfailingly when there was no reason for going either upstairs or down, and when, on the contrary, Sister Anne should have climbed to the top of her tower, she went off unassumingly by a door on the flat. In this way the attention of the playgoers was constantly kept on the alert.

Having reached the flies, these two staircases on which it has seemed fitting to supply a brief commentary, these two fixed staircases ended on a balcony which ran round the upper

regions as in the *patios* of Spanish houses. Vidame was wont to say as he walked along this slender structure:

‘A pity that all this is invisible from the audience. It’s up here that it would be delightful to play. It’s up here one ought to play not only *La Locandiera*, but *Hamlet*, yes, *Hamlet*! Why not? Think of that first scene . . . or again, *Les Perses*. The shade of Darius would rise from the hole, ascend from the depths, like a wreath of smoke . . . One must think it over. . . You never know . . .’

The part of the balcony that went behind the flies was wider than the rest. Through two little windows hidden in the woodwork and delicately latticed one could look down at the auditorium and watch the spectators. The actors often stood there while waiting for their cue to go to the stairs and make their entrance on the stage. And it was here that Queen Marie-Antoinette, emerging from her dressing-room, came and took her stand on the right of the dress rehearsal, while from the depths Mirabeau could be heard haranguing an invisible assembly.

‘Marius,’ declaimed the tribune, ‘is less to be admired for having defeated the Cimbrians than for having overthrown the privileges of the Roman aristocracy!’

This high-sounding phrase fell upon a deadly silence. King Louis XVI, taking an observation with his eyes glued to the lattice-work, clicked his tongue anxiously.

‘Devil take it!’ he said in a whisper. ‘The *patron* was rather counting on that bit of rant from Farge and it’s fallen flat. Oh! I hate the public at a dress rehearsal. Just look at them, Suzon—they look as if they’d all had a dose of castor oil. Now your scene, Suzon, went splendidly, my dear. Congratulations, Suzon. . . . And they gave you four curtains, which isn’t anything out of the way, considering your talent, but is quite wonderful when you’re aware of the temperature of the audience. Talk of smacks in the eye, that was a smack all right. Did you hear? Farge has just delivered his famous rigmarole over which there was such a lot of hair-splitting here last week. You heard, didn’t you? “The people need

only remain unmoved in order to be formidable." Now I think that's really fine. Well, I saw some people guying it. Look, there's Copeau, he's passing his hand over his cranium. And it's a fine cranium, as craniums go. But you can't say that he looks as if he were enjoying himself. See, he's looking up at the ceiling. Counting flies, I bet.'

'Where do you see Copeau?' inquired Suzanne softly.

'Fourth row, fifth stall from the right,' replied Paul Helloun meditatively. 'You know, Copeau doesn't care a damn for little old father Chérouvier and his *Mirabeau*. You can see clearly that in his eyes *Mirabeau* is a dud. But if by any chance the dud succeeds, so much the better for the progressive theatre movement in general, and Copeau will nod his cranium in approval. And if the dud fails Copeau is still on velvet because that shows clearly that the Vieux-Colombier can beat the Théâtre des Carmes. Oh, no! Our competitor is certainly not amused. Just look at them all, lined up like jars in a druggist's shop. I tell you, my little Suzanne, the affair stinks of a backer, of money that's been put up by heaven knows who. That's what our beloved theatre stinks of to-night.'

'You're crazy, Helloun! Everybody knows that M. Chérouvier is quite poor. Where is he?'

'In the stage box, well in evidence, but you don't recognize him because he's chopped off his beard.'

'Really? Is that him, just behind the *patron*? Good heavens, what a small head he's got! And hardly any chin!'

'Yes, he does look ridiculous. And all that, even the stand-up collar and the dinner-jacket, all that to please the Polish woman. Do you see her, the Polish creature?'

'Oh, leave me alone,' said Suzanne in a changed voice. 'I loathe women of that kind.'

'She's there in the middle of the third row, between Brisson and Lucien Descaves, in front of the fellow who signs himself Maurice Boissard. She's handsome, all the same, that Polish woman who is probably not Polish at all. And you know little old father Chérouvier has moved into a new flat. He

used to live just here, place de l'Estrapade, a twopenny-half-penny flat that smelt of cheese broth, *sauce piquant*, and white mice.'

'Look here, Helloun, I can't possibly hear the play. Do shut up. Patard'll stick you for a fine. You're talking louder than the people on the stage.'

'... My information is perhaps not reliable,' continued Louis XVI, 'but little old father Chérouvier is now living in the avenue du Parc-Montsouris, in a flat with a lift, a bow window, and all the rest of it. M. Chérouvier now takes a bath at least twice a week. It's what one might call a conversation, and the Polish woman is a great wonder-worker. Ugh! Suzon, you pinched me!'

'Helloun,' scolded the girl, 'once and for all I forbid you to speak to me of that woman.'

The fat man faced about in the half-light of the gangway, and peered at his companion in an endeavour to distinguish her features.

'My word, Suzon!' he said, 'you sound as if you were jealous. And that would be for the first time as far as I know.'

Suzanne replied hastily:

'I am only jealous when it concerns my profession, the only thing in the world I really love!'

'Right, right,' growled Helloun. 'You'd only got to say so. Wait now, look, the stuffed shirts have just registered a hit. Marvellous!'

'Give me a chance to hear,' said Suzanne, with an irritable shrug of the shoulders. 'You'll get fined. They'll hear you in the theatre. Look out, I see the *patron* fidgeting as if he had pins and needles.'

At that moment there was another slight stir among the audience. Some applause broke out in one of the rows of stalls. It didn't last, and almost at once that feeble flicker of enthusiasm died out.

'Pooh!' exclaimed Helloun, as with a careful finger he stuck down the edge of his wig. 'Pooh! It's Mano trying to

wake them up. It's des Combes starting the applause. Oh, that fellow, faithful to the last.'

'Hellouin, you smell of garlic, it's disgusting.'

Hellouin used to smell of garlic in the morning and the smell used to increase from one meal to another all day long, his fellow players never failing to protest. He seemed offended by Suzanne's remark and, leaving his post of observation, went to the rail and bent over, looking down into the depths of the stage as it were into the shaft of a mine. One could see below a *salon* lighted by two silver candelabras. The Count de la Marck was offering Gabriel de Mirabeau a mysterious casket and the tribune was scribbling with a huge goose-quill his famous secret advice on the ideal *ordonnance* of a constitutional monarchy. . . .

At that moment in the darkness of the upper balcony the Marquis de La Fayette appeared. He looked cross and worried.

'Tss . . . tss,' he said, with a shake of the head. 'It's going even worse than was expected. Farge very nearly got stuck a little while ago. Did you hear? And then Bazzaro lost his head. Were you listening?'

'How can I hear,' said Suzanne, 'with Hellouin jabbering the whole time.'

'I can tell you it was frightful,' continued the Marquis de La Fayette. 'Luckily Patard had got the script. He managed to pull them together. But it was a narrow squeak. The icy wind of disaster. And such a silence. I heard somebody snoring. Bet it was Paul Souday.'

At the Théâtre des Carmes there was no regular prompter, Patard, the stage manager and handy man, would have the script in his hand and would conceal himself behind a door or in the upper gallery. This is where he appeared at this very moment behind the three players and began scolding:

'What are you doing here all together? Charruel, you'll miss your entrance. Go down at once. Things are going badly and no mistake. What on earth put it into the *patron's* head to produce such flapdoodle?'

Shoving the Marquis de La Fayette in front of him, he went off along the fire-proof, sound-proof balcony, raising a light cloud of dust from the thick felt carpet.

'You see, Suzon?' continued Hellouin in hushed tones. 'When the *patron* puts on a dud, which he rarely does, it's always because he has an idea, a scheme, at the back of his mind. I'm not in the secret of the gods, but if you'll be good enough to listen to me for half a minute, I'll tell you why Vidame went and fished out that old chimpanzee of a Chérouvier. You don't answer, Suzon?'

Suzanne remained motionless and silent. Then the portly Louis XVI began to stroke the young woman's hand. Speaking softly and earnestly he said:

'I don't care if I don't hear the play. You can see for yourself that the *patron* doesn't care a damn about it. He knows what he's doing. And all those sheep in the auditorium can get out if it's more than they can stomach. The critics will write respectful articles for form's sake. . . And so, Suzon, you don't love anybody, you really believe that you don't love anybody . . .'

'What are you up to, my poor Paul?' said Suzanne, withdrawing her hand sharply. 'Are you going to start that again?'

'No, no,' said the fat king, shaking his wig. 'No, I was cured of all that long ago. Oh, I was in love with you, just like everybody else, of course. It was a passion, Suzon, a real passion. Don't let's talk about it. I am beginning to know you and understand you. You're incapable of loving anybody; very well, at least you believe that you're incapable of loving anybody. Well, Suzon, that's where you're mistaken, my pet; you're in love with Vidame, my lass, and it's me telling you, and I know what I'm talking about.'

'You're a fool!' exclaimed the young woman in such loud, vibrant tones that instinctively Hellouin put up a hand to shut her mouth. 'You're a fool, my poor Hellouin.'

'I may be a fool, but I know what I think, little girl. And if I can see so clearly what you are incapable of seeing for

yourself, it's because I care for him, the *patron*, because I love him, d'you hear?'

He leant over in the dark so closely that the queen drew her whole body away from him. Still leaning forward he said:

'Yes, I love him. I love him as a dog loves his master. If he were to say to me: "Lie flat on the ground and I'll walk over your back," well, I might curse him for form's sake, no doubt, but I'd lie down and let him trample on me, and I even believe I'd like it. He may chuck me out of doors tomorrow, if he has the pluck. But I shall come back by the window, for I simply can't live without him. In my eyes he's intelligent, handsome, witty, more intelligent, handsomer, wittier than all those fellows who are yawning away down there, displaying their soft palates, their tonsils, their gullets, and what not. And so, you see, Suzon, that's how it is I can understand that you . . .'

'Be quiet,' whispered the girl. 'Shut up, Hellouin, I hate you.'

'I'll hold my tongue if you wish, Suzon, but I'm telling you great news which ought to please you: you are in love, my dear, and didn't even know it.'

'I only love my work,' she declared positively.

'That's just it! And your work and Vidame are one and the same. Ah! the "third" is over. Look out for the curtain!'

The curtain began to slide down on a complicated set of rods with a rumble of motors and a great swish of fabrics. The queen stepped back from the latticed peep-hole. They could hear some feeble applause and the sound seemed to come from another world. The curtain rose and fell, lazily, without conviction, stirring up dust and slumbering odours. King Louis XVI stretched and yawned noisily like a man released from all restraints, and said out loud in the hurly-burly of the interval now beginning:

'If the *patron* puts on a dud it's because he's in need of money, and I'm the last to blame him for it. That man knows what he's doing. Let's go down, my little Suzon. Come

and listen to these dress rehearsal fatheads who are going to strain their wits, out of politeness, you understand, to avoid saying a word about the play itself. Come and have a look at the flowers that little old father Chérouvier has sent you. I've a notion that they'll smell of Poland or something like it—in a word, of something Slavonic and Asiatic.'

VII

THERE are minutes that are interminable—yes, indeed, interminable, and why interminable?—minutes that are delicious—but why so very delicious? Why so delicious as to border on pain?—minutes during which it seems to the Countess Almaviva that the voice of Chérubin touches her like a caress on her cheek, her lips, and even her heart, exquisite and poignant minutes during which, like a needle—a long, long, adorably slender, long needle—the voice of the boy, after having touched it, transpierces the heart of the countess. But is it really a small boy who sings the love lament?

Qui vous met à la gêne?
Qui vous fait tant pleurer?

And now under the very gaze of the countess, Chérubin begins to change. He grows and grows. Now he sings no more in that boyish treble but in a voice of thunder, a terrible voice. It's not Chérubin, no, it's the wretched Testevel who went off long ago to forget his love, to die of fever perhaps, die in the swamps of Indo-China, and never be heard of again. No, it's not Testevel, it's that musician with the curly hair and pointed beard who was in love with the countess, he too, but whose name is already wellnigh forgotten. . . .

Once more the vision clears and the little page appears in perfect outline. His name is Chérubin, to be sure, but it's also Philippe Baudoin; he speaks and sings so persuasively that his breath for a moment stirs a ringlet of powdered hair which escapes from that very complicated coiffure in which the countess takes such delight and flutters against her temple.

But he is no longer called Philippe, the young page, but Jean-Paul Sénac. He is called Richard Fauvet, like the ex-husband of Cécile Pasquier. He is called . . . O God! Has not the Countess Almaviva for many a year heard that love-lament ascend to her from all these young men who were all—by what strange event?—the friends of her brother Laurent Pasquier?

Madame et souveraine

(Que mon cœur, mon cœur a de peine) .

But what is truly strange is that through and beyond the little page, the translucent substance of the little page, the countess has just become aware of a material object whose presence there is incomprehensible and yet familiar. It is a porcelain night-light, all rosy with its inward flame. In a playful voice but, as was fitting, with a touch of feeling, the countess murmurs the familiar words: 'They are in such a hurry that they have forgotten to put the . . . to put the . . . to put the . . .' The phrase falls back into its groove over and over again, like a tune on a damaged gramophone disk. What is it, what can it be, that elusive word? 'They have forgotten to put the . . .'? For an eternity the countess searches in the dark for the missing word. But now Chérubin changes face again. He now stares fixedly at the countess with the hard, handsome features of Alexis Vialas. The countess tries vainly to suppress a groan. No, no! What is that cruel creature doing here in the middle of the second act? Let no one ever mention Alexis Vialas again. And now here is the page speaking with the voice of that dear Hervé, who was killed in the Argonne in 1918. It's a voice that wrings your heart, the voice of the sole beloved, maybe. God! how long life is, even the life of a woman who is still young, still so very young! The Countess Almaviva gives a long sigh and says in pearly accents, exquisitely clear and true: 'As for my ribbon, monsieur, since it's the one whose colour suits me best . . . I was very angry at having lost it'

At the exact moment of the colloquy a great wave of murky light swept across the Countess Almaviva's vision, dissolving all the ghostly figures and scattering every recollection. Anto-

nine was drawing the curtains. Even the glow of the night-light was drowned in the deluge. The Countess Almoviva turned with a lazy languid movement to where the Jouy tapestry enlivened the walls with its gay pastoral design of streams and bridges, shepherdesses, bands of goatherd musicians, and all sorts of dainty figures, amongst which the girl for yet another moment chased her fleeting dream.

This was how every night she was wont to dream, ever since her childhood, ever since the beginning of time. They were not separate dreams but a single long dream, barely interrupted by her waking hours, a single dream constantly renewed, which formed the accompaniment to Suzanne's life, the subterranean music of that secret mysterious existence, which even to her parents, even to her comrades and friends, seemed strange and hard to understand. A long dream, 'sometimes agonizing, sometimes deliciously enjoyable, always looked forward to as a nocturnal feast, and yet always haunted, ravaged by what the oneirologists call vocational anguish, a dream in which Suzanne's own personal life mingled with all the creatures of art and poetry in an incoherent fashion, yet so full of delight that she carried it with her all day long in a quivering ecstasy.

Suzanne closed her eyes. She longed for just another minute to sink back into that sweet slumber, for just another minute to mingle with those frail yet immortal figures which so long had been her escort and her real companions. She made an effort to feel for yet a moment on her brow, her eyes, her lips, her lovely neck the caress of all those glances, and to recapture that murmur of adoration which seemed to her the most desirable of all delights. Had she not since the very beginning of time linked herself with those all-knowing dream creatures whose every utterance is of resounding beauty: Ophelia and Bérénice, Araminte and Donna Sol?

At that exact moment occurred a perfectly natural manifestation of the familiar drama, the reappearance of Chérubin among the shepherd lads on the wall, a half-naked Chérubin, with downcast eyes and chubby pink cheeks. He whispered: 'When a ribbon . . . has bound the head . . . or touched the

skin of a person . . .’ And the Countess Almaviva wiped his eyes and said with a smile: ‘Hush, hush, child, all that is sheer nonsense.’

Love—is it not that delicious song that one sighs forth on the stage in the blaze of the spot-light? Love—is it not that ardent gaze which men, yes, all men, offer like an urgent prayer to Suzanne’s face, hair, shoulders, hands, to Suzanne’s whole person? Love—it is that enraptured stir that rises from the auditorium when Olivia lifts her veil to reveal herself to Duke Orsino’s messenger. Love—it is that excited clamour which bursts from the depths when La Péricole, glittering like a reliquary, stamps her foot and cries out: ‘Vive le taureau!’ Love—it is the thrill that runs through the crowd when Silvia with lowered eyes confesses in the softest of tones: ‘Do you know that you charm me, Dorante?’ Love—it is not love that is hidden in Suzanne’s heart, it is what other hearts feel at the sight of Suzanne, what they never weary of offering to Suzanne, of dedicating, consecrating to Suzanne.

At that moment in her day-dream the girl, like a diver seeking the lowest depths, made an effort with all her being to escape and plunge yet deeper. On two occasions, and on two only in Suzanne’s entire life, had love changed its direction and nature. At this thought Suzanne felt her heart turn over. Hard and ironical, the image of Alexis Vialas returned to mingle among the shepherdesses of the tapestry like a stranger and an enemy. Then she saw again, almost immediately, the sad smile of that child Hervé Le Bris, who might perhaps have changed her whole destiny, but who had been killed in the war and about whom it was wiser not to think for fear of being really unhappy. No! No! One must not dwell on such memories. Suzanne had given herself body and soul to the theatre, which was much more beautiful, much fuller and more astonishing than life, and above all, more real than this misleading life, so marred with absurd mischances and disturbing adventures, and peopled with rough, stupid, ill-natured companions. No, it was here she found happiness, in this goodly warmth of proffered love, in this effulgence of

homage and admiration, in this everlasting make-believe which took the place of life itself, transfiguring it, raising it to the enchanted spheres where dwell none but heroes and goddesses, where nothing is heard but the sound of heavenly harps and the echo of immortal words.

Suzanne's eyes were now wide open. The dream, as on every morning, began to dissolve into vague arguments which were not far from being ingenuous excuses. . . . Suzanne was like that. She had now given her life to the stage, to the art of the theatre, as Laurent had given his to science, and as their sister Cécile had since the beginning of time given hers to music. Yes, Suzanne, too, was one of these Pasquier children whose talents, whose intelligence . . . In her own way as an actress she had worked hard, especially during the last ten years; she had made strenuous efforts towards hobnobbing more freely with the masterpieces, as the *patron's* friend, the ever faithful Emmanuel des Combes, would say—he who in the past had also been among Suzanne's adorers but had never breathed a word of it, no doubt for fear of displeasing Vidame, as well as from his natural shyness.

Suzanne advanced a groping hand along the sheets until, as happened every morning, it reached the little brass tray on which Antonine had brought the letters. It was impossible now to sink back again. Impossible, even for a single second, to drift back to fairyland, to the kingdom of illusions. The day was opening out like a long straight road. All the tasks and duties that the day had in store must now be faced in turn.

There were not many letters, and Suzanne's glance was flying from one envelope to another when suddenly she recognized Vidame's writing. It was a short and cryptic note which she read twice straight off and then re-read a third time slowly with an anxious eye. Vidame's writing was very legible, a graceful cursive hand not unlike that of the eighteenth century; the tails of the letters were rather too long and the loops somewhat spidery. The writer's meaning was never easy to read under this attractive exterior.

'DEAR SUZANNE,' he wrote, 'the failure of *Mirabeau*—a perfectly respectable failure, certainly—is a blow to the stability of our beloved theatre. We shall have to put on something else very promptly. If it should turn out that I could not offer you, in the play yet to be chosen, the part which is rightfully due to your talent, no one would be more grieved than myself. But I know that you are sufficiently devoted to the Théâtre des Carmes to make every excuse for its director, who, you must never doubt, my dear Suzanne, remains your faithful friend,

'ERIC V'

Suzanne put the note back in its envelope and pondered for a considerable time. Certainly she had had plenty of experience of theatre intrigues and the plots, meannesses, and deceptions of stage life. But Vidame's note seemed in its curtness and vagueness to be laden with threats and obscure dangers. She had played in various Paris theatres; at the moment she was high in popular favour and did not anticipate any difficulty in finding an engagement. But she was genuinely attached to the little Théâtre des Carmes, and Vidame was not mistaken in relying on her attachment. Moreover, it was one of the few stages on which one could feel burning the flame of an art which Suzanne looked upon as pure, radiant, and free, an art in which she took pleasure. How was she to interpret this disquieting missive? Whom could she consult in such a situation? To whom could she turn for wise counsel? Whom could she ask for enlightenment?

She turned over in her mind various names and faces. Of the theatre her sister and her brothers were profoundly ignorant. She could not even imagine the possibility of getting from them the slightest practical advice. She bethought herself at once of her fellow actors, because they had all been trained in the same school, and were familiar with its ways. Hellouin was a decent sort; but could you depend on him for an impartial judgment? There was in his attachment to Vidame a sort of ingenuous, fanatical self-abasement which it

would be wise to guard against. Farge's standing was not high in this exclusive little community. He was not in the confidence of the *patron*; moreover the failure of this new play in which he played the principal part had just dealt him a blow that had left him gasping. Charruel? Ah, yes, from Charruel one could expect, not comfort certainly, but perhaps sober sense and even clear-sightedness.

Charruel was a man of good manners and a dry, sceptical temperament. He was getting older, constantly playing the role of guide, philosopher, and friend, without special distinction. He did not really seem to be suited to other parts. His voice was clear and his diction good. He was fond of declaring that he lacked ambition; as a matter of fact he never stopped talking with a bitter irony of his career, stifled in obscurity. He was fond of saying: 'On the stage unpretentiousness is never rewarded, not even in a specialized theatre such as the *Carnes*. Take my case. My name's Charruel. It's plain, it's countrified, not high-sounding or swanky. I could have changed my name. If I'd taken a stage name such as Guy del Montefiore or Isidore d'Ostromont, with my looks and my professional experience I should be taking the lead to-day at the *Comédie Française*, or be manager of a theatre; I should be wearing the rosette and I should be in the running for a professorship at the *Conservatoire*. Well, you see, I stuck to the honourable name of my ancestors. Result: I just vegetate and only get second leads which don't in the least interest me. But I don't care. I have my compensations. I am above all that sort of thing . . .'

Suzanne dressed herself, not with the usual dreamy and voluptuous delays, but with an ill-checked trembling of her impatient fingers. She was worried, feeling that she was being unjustly slighted, that there was a threat to her kingdom endangering even her talents. She dared not look in her mirror in the sudden fear of seeing herself ill-favoured, of finding her eyes swollen, her skin sallow, which had never yet befallen her and was unimaginable. Decidedly, she would call up Charruel, who was cold but knowledgable and would be able

to give her some subtle hint of the schemes and machinations of Eric Vidame. That name uttered even faintly, or merely evoked in the silence of thought, sent waves of anger surging in her heart. She did not love, she never would love, this man on whom it would be madness to rely for any sort of trustful collaboration. Was it possible that Vidame had the faintest appeal for her? No, his head was too long, his features too long, and his skin coarse-grained. Suzanne sought for disparaging epithets. She was almost surprised not to find any. She had had too happy a life and had never needed to be abusive. No matter, she was determined to hate Vidame, to hate his pseudo-aristocratic superciliousness, his complacency, and his somewhat cheap sarcasm. She was not in love with him, and certainly never would be; she even felt a secret and inexplicable aversion for him. What was more, she would tell him so. Already she was arranging in her head the words and phrases she would some day cast in his teeth.

She felt that she was about to cry, to sob, and to no purpose, for it would only redden her eyes and spoil her complexion. She started to go from her bedroom to her boudoir, then she stood at the window for a long time motionless.

The flat was on the fifth floor and had a balcony from which one could view Paris, with the river, the two islands, the cathedral, halted in the current like a magnificent ark, and, further on, towers gilded by the chilly spring sunshine, the hill of Montmartre with its chalk-white cupolas, and lastly, more distant heights covered with April green.

Charruel appeared towards eleven o'clock, just when Suzanne was beginning to work herself up again, going from one room to the other, now in childish distress, now in rage. Charruel seated himself in a deep arm-chair, crossed his legs, toyed with his gloves, and asked if he might light a cigarette, holding forth meanwhile in that careful, slightly precious voice which he 'placed' in private life as on the stage, if it were only to order a couple of fried eggs in his usual eating-house. He was saying:

'The *patron* now insists on my giving a special pronunciation

to the mute *e*'s. That's his latest fad, his great discovery of the season. He declares there are four different modulations for the mute *e* and that no one in Fiance nowadays speaks correctly. To hear him one would suppose that I'd have to begin again at the beginning with *a*, *b*, *ab*, like an infant. It's maddening. Tell me, Suzanne, he hasn't started on you with his mute *e*'s, has he?

Without replying Suzanne handed Charruel Vidame's letter. He pulled out from his waistcoat an eye-glass on the end of a moiré ribbon, fixed it, read the note attentively, and gave a shout of laughter.

'Char,' said the girl, 'it's no laughing matter. What does it really mean? He speaks of a play yet to be chosen. What prevarication! And what play is he talking about?'

'But, my dear,' exclaimed Charruel, 'you are the only one in the theatre who doesn't know what is going on. The play is already chosen, Suzanne. It's actually in rehearsal.'

'You're quite mistaken, Char,' cut in the girl in a changed voice. 'I was at the theatre last night . . .'

'And no one said anything to you about it! Just so, that's our style. It doesn't alter the fact that rehearsals have been going on in the studio for the last two days. We are rehearsing, and I can be positive because I'm in it.'

'And what are you rehearsing? *Henry IV*, perhaps?'

'No, *Lear*! Everybody knows that at the theatre. You are the only one, Suzanne, I tell you, who tries to ignore the dirty trickery, both in small and great matters, that seems inherent in our impossible profession. And you're not even asking me who is to play Cordelia?'

As the girl made no reply, Charruel paused, allowed his monocle to drop, and then proceeded to hold forth in that quiet, well-modulated voice of his.

'No, no,' he said, 'the theatre isn't what you think, Suzanne. The theatre may have been something great in the days of Aeschylus, or even in the century of Corneille. And yet everything must have been, as to-day, more or less poisoned by questions of money. I suppose you're unaware that Vidame is

in arrears to the tune of a good hundred thousand francs. Vidame talks admirably about art, in terms of respectful, religious conviction, but when he runs short of cash, well, then he's like everybody else. For the last two years, des Combes has been taking the hat round the industrialists and business people who are looked upon as friends of our theatre. They needed a lot of pressing. There was one who was agreeable provided an engagement was found for a girl friend who didn't even know how to walk or speak on the stage. There was another who agreed to pay up; but at the last moment he pulled out a manuscript. They all have manuscripts. What man is there who hasn't written a play at least once in his damned life? You must understand, Suzanne, that the stage, even the cleanest, is always, under present conditions and by the force of circumstances, a school of prostitution and low bargaining.

'Charruel, you horrify me!'

'My dear Suzanne, that is how things are. If the fellows badgered by des Combes had stumped up a sufficient sum we should have produced the dog-eared masterpiece of a man who, I understand, is a manufacturer of furniture polish, or something of the kind. But they haggled and quibbled. Time was running. So the *patron* put on this *Mirabeau*. And our theatre is one of the temples of art! One of the sanctuaries of the spirit. Ouf!'

There was a brief but well-calculated silence while Charruel flicked imaginary dust from his spats with his gloves. As Suzanne remained silent, the actor went on:

'You can't imagine, Suzanne, what a man like Chérouvier stood for in our eyes, in the eyes of my generation. He was our master, our conscience, our oracle. When we wondered what we ought to think about the terrible problems set us by the period, by the war, for instance, or by the class struggle, or the fight for liberty, neither more nor less, we would go off and call on Chérouvier, and we never left without some words of wisdom and humane understanding. And then . . . and then . . . I suppose you never read a short story of Tolstoy's called *Father Sergei*. No? Well, you must. It's the story

of a good man who withdrew from the world in order to become a saint. He did in fact become a saint and he grew old in the odour of sanctity. But one fine day he looked at the little girl who brought him his food. And he allowed himself to be tempted by that little girl. And then he said to her: "Are you the devil?"

'In what way,' inquired Suzanne, 'should this story remind you of M. Chérouvier?'

'Come, Suzanne, come, don't overdo that sweet innocence of yours. I suppose you have enough imagination to understand that M. Chérouvier was a sort of saint. Don't let us say any more about it, it's too painful. But that doesn't alter the fact that the Théâtre des Carmes is going to exist for some time on the money of this lady who calls herself a Pole and who, to begin with, is going to play Cordelia with an accent which is certainly not very marked, but for all that has a distinct flavour of caviare and vodka.'

Unable to conceal her irritation, Suzanne was pacing about the room with lowered head. Charruel rose, gave a long sigh, and went on in a pained voice:

'I need hardly tell you that Mlle Praga has just signed a formal contract. Even the best of theatres is no better than a cave, my poor friend. The theatre is a lost art. Oh, I stick to it, I shall go on with it, no doubt, for the excellent reason that I can't do anything else. Good-bye, Suzanne, and courage, my dear!'

When she was alone the girl began a feverish search in the cupboards and chests of drawers. She sent for a suit-case and began to pack some linen and clothes. She was so upset that she had to re-pack several times before settling on a sensible choice. Then she ate a boiled egg and drank a cup of vervain under the attentive and disapproving eye of a very dignified Antonine. About two o'clock she left the house and went off to the Théâtre des Carmes. The charwomen were cleaning the auditorium amidst a cloud of dust in the gloom of a catacomb. A sound as of a classroom came from the studio, a narrow subterranean room where the actors were no doubt

just taking their first run through the text. Two electricians were working on the stage. Their dialogue and their hammers reverberated dismally as in a cellar—and this in a structure renowned for its exemplary elimination of resonances.

A prey to melancholy, Suzanne made her way to her dressing-room and turned on the lamps on either side of the mirror. A crude white light flooded the little room. Mme Charlemagne had absent-mindedly left the room in a very untidy state. A silk garment lay on one of the chairs, as it were the faded relic of some dream-heroine. A dishevelled wig was hanging on its block. There was powder and dust on the tables and on the scattered toilet articles. Flowers were fading in a tall porcelain vase. A sweet, poignant, intimate scent lingered in the air under the dazzling, cruel glare of the lamps. Suzanne compressed her lips and began to empty the drawers and to fling what she found there pell-mell into a little leather case. From time to time she would pause a moment and fall into a reverie. She was no longer angry but very sad, and very weary. When she had almost finished this disposal of most of her little belongings she was aware that someone had just come to a halt behind her in the half-open doorway. It was Vidame. On his face was a wheedling smile. He was the first to speak.

‘What luck! I was just going by. I might have missed you. No doubt you were coming to my office. You’ve had my letter, Suzon? May I inquire what you’re doing with that magnificent luggage?’

She whirled round and faced him fiercely.

‘No, I didn’t intend to see you, but only to write. I’m leaving, do you understand? I’m leaving this theatre and I’m leaving you too.’

Vidame gave a bitter-sweet smile and began to lament.

‘You might spare me scenes of this kind, Suzon, at a time when you are perhaps aware I have endless troubles. Whom can I rely on now?’

‘On whom you like,’ replied Suzanne, ‘but certainly not on me’

Vidame's smile withered. He said in a lowered voice:

'You will be putting us to considerable disadvantage. We are a repertory theatre. I need you at any moment.'

'I am understudied in all my roles, and even, from now on, replaced.'

'Don't talk nonsense, Suzanne. And be sensible: remember that we hold a forfeit, we have our contracts.'

'I'm not worried about your forfeit. Go to law if you dare. Paris will then hear what I think of you.'

Vidame made an attempt to get hold of Suzanne's hand. He said in honeyed tones:

'You're too much of an artist to go elsewhere. What could you do away from here?'

'I don't wish to play anywhere else. I'm going to give up the stage. I've made up my mind.'

'Nec sine te, nec tecum,' Vidame sighed mournfully.

'What is that you say?'

'I say: "Neither with you, nor without you." Don't leave the stage just for a trivial quarrel!'

'I'm going to leave the stage. It fills me with disgust.'

Vidame made an eloquent gesture.

'What would you say, my poor friend, if you knew it as I do, as I am obliged, much in spite of myself, to know it?'

Suddenly rigid, Suzanne exclaimed:

'For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down'

'Oh,' murmured Vidame, 'so you'd already learnt Cordelia.'

'I haven't learnt Cordelia. I am Cordelia, monsieur.'

'Now be sensible, Suzanne, and let your poor wretched *patron* settle his troublesome affairs to the best advantage.'

'I wish to be Cordelia.'

'That's impossible, Suzanne. And then, as I've probably told you already, you needn't regret it; it can never be more than a small part.'

'There are parts only ten lines long that I wouldn't give up to any one. A part is great in our eyes, and you know it better than I do, by what we think and live of it during the *entr'actes*.'

Vidame shrugged his shoulders. He had managed to get hold of Suzanne's hand and was stroking it gently.

'You don't suppose, do you,' she said at last, 'that you are going to turn me round your finger in a few moments as Gloucester does with Lady Anne? You must surely have understood that my resolution is fixed. While you're waiting to open your new play, you can do *Les Fourberies*, in which I don't appear. So there you are. I say good-bye.'

Vidame frowned.

'Very well, Suzanne. Go your way. I shall have to look into the matter with the board and our lawyer.'

As Suzanne made no reply he shook his head two or three times in displeasure and went out, banging the door. A little further down the corridor he began to groan; then he gave a sigh and said between his teeth:

'Pooh! I shall give a whistle one day later on, at the right moment. I shall give a whistle and she'll come right back. I shall offer her a tiny part, a mere lump of sugar, and she'll come and lick my hand.'

He lit a cigarette and went on grumbling to himself for quite a long time.

Meanwhile Suzanne was leaving the theatre, her leather case in her hand. She felt herself suddenly free in a horrible fashion, not liberated but rather forsaken, empty, like a sheep that has part of its brain removed.

She debated for a moment whether to go straight home or wander about for a while, in order to discipline her nerves and work off her anger. Then, quickly making up her mind, she went into the post office on the boulevard Saint-Germain, hunted for some time in her note-book for an address casually jotted down on the corner of a page, and in the end wrote standing, on an ink-stained desk, the following note:

'MY DEAR PHILIPPE,—Don't go looking for me at the theatre any more. I have broken my engagement and mean to leave Paris where I can no longer be happy. If there really is a place for a stranger in that sweet house at Nesles which you

have so often told me about, come and fetch me as quickly as possible. My luggage is half ready. Don't delay too long, Philippe. I am wretched, so wretched that I might easily commit some folly. Save me from that folly which I have not yet committed and of which I don't even know myself what it could be.

'Your bewildered friend,

'SUZANNE.'

VIII

WHEN they had got out of the taxi Philippe took hold of the suit-cases.

'Don't look for a porter,' he said. 'There are no porters for trains of this kind. You're not starting out for Egypt or Italy, Suzanne. You're not off to some distant clime where you are to act before rows of princes and melancholy diplomats. You are coming to live in a village in the Île de France. And the train we are going to take is, since you are willing, the humble little train which every evening makes its way towards the fields and woods with a load of people all eager to turn their backs on the town and to catch a glimpse, if it's not already too dark, of the blossom of the cherry-tree they planted with their own hands, and which shivers in all its branches because the sky is too clear and it's certainly going to freeze.'

'But,' said the girl, 'those two suit-cases are quite heavy.'

'I've come empty-handed on purpose, without even the portfolio from which I'm never parted. And I've come by myself, Suzanne, so as not to have to share with any one else the pleasure of carrying something belonging to you. I'd like to carry you yourself in my arms: yes, I'd like to cross a swift river with water up to my waist, bearing you high in my arms, hiding you in my arms as one hides the frightened child who is afraid of seeing the Erl King.'

The two walked on through the hubbub of the crowded platform, and suddenly Suzanne stopped, put her hand on

Philippe's wrist, and said, in a voice so low as to be barely audible:

'Philippe, you are my friend and I like you very much. The idea of living for a few days with you in the midst of your people whom I hardly know, or rather do not know at all, this idea comforts me and warms my heart. But, Philippe, you too hardly know me, mon Dieu! and I, I . . .'

The young man put down the suit-cases on the concrete of the platform. He looked at Suzanne gravely. And the strange conversation went on in low voices among the noise and stir of the bustling crowd.

'Philippe, I'm beginning to know myself. I'm never sure of myself and the idea that I could give any sort of pledge is disquieting and worrying me a little.'

She stopped, stammering, her eyelids flickering, her heart wrung with distress. In the meantime a furtive, painful thought stole into her mind: 'I should never have thought of such a thing even five years ago. How cautious and sensible I'm getting! But I can't lead this boy on and let him believe . . .'

She caught herself, for a flash, whispering in her heart 'the tender words of the Countess Almaviva. . . . But no, Philippe was certainly not Chérubin, he was a grown man, tried in the furnace of war. Oh, no doubt he attracted her, but she was quite determined to make no promise, to keep herself for her own private dreams, to shield herself from any inroads of reality, no matter how pleading, seductive, and unexpected they might be.

The young man had picked up the suit-cases once more and was advancing through the crowd with his not ungraceful limp.

'But who talks of pledges and promises between us two?' he said. 'I look upon you as completely free, first of all because I'm not in a position to do otherwise, and then because I feel such a dear delight in watching you and listening to you. But that's all, that's all, Suzanne, and there is nothing in that to alarm you. It turns out that the village of Nesles-la-Vallée is the native soil of your father's family. . . .'

'Yes, I went there two or three times when I was a little girl. But I have only the dimmest recollection of it.'

'So much the better, the surprise will be the greater. So you see you are coming back to the land of your forbears. . . . Come on, Suzanne, get into the carriage. It's a third-class carriage. It's understood, Suzanne, that you're to see our life in its complete simplicity. Sit down. We'll go on talking quite softly. You look like a princess in flight. And we might even not talk at all. We can listen to our neighbours saying all sorts of naive things, which are sometimes quite touching, and sometimes rather coarse. In the second they say lots of stupid things, sometimes. Here it's still nature, and it's mostly strong and wholesome enough. Yes, you're coming back to the land of your grandfather, Bruno Pasquier, and of his forbears. And it's not with your brother Joseph, Paris deputy and new squire of my village, it's not with him, as it happens, that you are to stay, no, it's at the *Cavée des Portes*, with us, the Baudoins.'

'You compel me to go on asking questions, Philippe, what is this *Cavée des Portes*?'

'I've already told you; it's the name of a little lane and also the name of our house; the lane runs past the walls of the house. We shan't get there before nightfall. Aren't you hungry or thirsty?'

Suzanne laughed.

'No; but supposing I were hungry or thirsty, were you perhaps thinking of taking me to the dining-car?'

'I have in my pockets a brioche baked for you by my sister, Thérèse, and a flask of our wine. Look how the train is speeding along. Isn't it fine?'

It was a train made up of antiquated carriages without corridors. All its joints cracked and all its windows rattled. It had dashed off bravely as if to get over the most painful part of the journey at once, to be quickly done with the long gullies scooped out between smoke-blackened houses, the engine sheds, the repair shops and factories, the fortifications and the decrepit faubourgs, the canals and the sordid, sooty-faced

hovels. Then it had raced along whistling proudly through enormous herds of ill-assorted little houses, scattered haphazard amongst chilly gardens where lilacs were beginning to show blossom. Then it had greeted the first of the orchards in bloom, the first open-air peach-trees decked in pink snow, the first milk-white spurs bearing aloft a frail hope of pears to come, the first fields of red and black currants whose foliage was lit up like precious stained glass in the glow of the dying day. It had only stopped once to set down hastily a part of its living freight. And now it was panting a little as it climbed a long slope on which could be seen real fields, fields of oats and lucerne with their deep-rutted cart tracks on which wagons were returning at a staid pace to the villages. And then one caught a glimpse of a wood, already shivering in its new garb of green. At last the train began to gather speed, jolting and swaying on its grinding brakes, and Philippe murmured:

'Here we are in the valley of the Oise. It's too late to see it properly. But you'll learn later on to know this country which is your own, Suzanne. I must tell you that this is a real journey and that we are going to change trains. As soon as we have crossed the river we shall be in the real country. It will be colder there, and the air clearer, the vegetation will have a different smell, and by to-morrow you'll notice that it's a little more backward than on this side of the water. As if it were getting clear of the warmth of the town. Look, we're going to get out. I would almost like to say to you: Don't look any more, Suzanne. Just let yourself be steered into harbour. I hope you're well wrapped up, for the vegetation in these parts, by its mere luxuriance, keeps the air very keen.'

A great sombre sapphire sky welcomed them as they left the train. The stars were beginning to twinkle in the dusk. A beautiful planet, pale-blue like Suzanne's eyes, was already shining in the strip of golden sky at the horizon towards the sunset. They clambered laughing into an arthritic old local. In the middle of the carriage there was a cast-iron stove, no longer in action, for the season was already well advanced, but

not yet dismantled. A very oily lantern swung at the end of the carriage. Nearly all the passengers knew each other and kept up a cheerful interchange of questions, not about their families but about their kitchen gardens, their sowings, and their plantings. Presently the little train uttered a long shriek as of some prehistoric animal, sneezed, coughed, started to crawl, and after a vague contortion or two dived into the densest of the greenery like a snake in the grass. It was now completely night, a woodland night, green and shivery with damp odours. Now and again the young growth parted to reveal bright clusters of stars, a scrap of satiny sky, and a slender crescent moon in whose hollow all the rest of the planet appeared translucent, lit up by a pale glimmer, like a round acorn in a cup of light.

'It's splendid,' said the young man, his voice only just dominating the metallic clatter of the old vehicle, 'it's splendid to think that we are going to have Suzanne all to ourselves.'

Suzanne shrugged her shoulders sadly.

'Ah,' she said, 'Suzanne without the theatre is perhaps no longer Suzanne.'

'Haven't you really any regrets?' inquired Philippe in a low voice.

And as Suzanne slowly shook her head to signify something that resembled a no, the young man went on:

'You'll see our cousin, Paule Chastel, who remained with us when her parents went off to America. And I must tell you that we've only one servant, Céline. We're very fond of her. She has her meals with us, and so does her little boy.'

'Then she's married?'

Philippe shook his head.

'No, but that makes no difference. We love to have her like that, with the child. We never mention the father, and luckily Céline hardly ever thinks of him. Now I fancy I've introduced to you all the regular inhabitants of the house over and above the family itself. I don't speak of passing visitors: there are usually some staying in the house. You won't be

cold, Suzanne. But everything is very plain in our house and I am beginning to be worried. Ah, here we are at Nesles. That's the level crossing. It remains open all night: the train won't move again till dawn. Now come on, Suzanne! We shall have to go on foot to the Cavée des Portes, which is above the village. You'll be good enough to take my arm. It's not a favour I'm asking, it's to save you from stumbling in the dark. Don't think any more about your luggage. You'll find it in your room.'

The little train had come to a standstill in the night, which had suddenly grown very chill. The passengers got out and dispersed in various directions. Just outside the station Philippe gave a low whistle. Gesticulating shadows loomed up and disappeared. There were cries and laughter, and then a lively song faded into the darkness. Suzanne murmured:

'I thought I recognized your brother Hubert's voice and laugh. But I can't see a thing. Don't leave me, Philippe.'

'Don't be afraid. I'm taking your arm. The slender crescent moon will be our only light. In the entire district there are only four or five street lamps, and even those are not lit after the first of April. But I know every stone of the road and, if necessary, I could find my way by the smells as my father has learnt to do since he has been blind. For instance, along this wall we shall smell the lilacs. It's a delicious fragrance: it only lasts a few days, and since the year is long, one has time to forget it; but if we should get a whiff of it when we are among the dead it would bring tears of regret to our eyes. What you smell now is syringa; the smell is intoxicating. It's only just in flower. It reminds one of orange blossom. We are so poor in words expressive of scents! The animals must be a thousand times better off than we, in their secret language.'

'I heard something stirring there in the dark on the right.'

'We brushed against a great ivy bush where hundreds of birds are asleep and no doubt we woke up a few of them. What you hear now is the sound of bullocks and cows chewing

the cud on the other side of that big wall. In the war I slept next to bullocks and cows like the infant Jesus in His manger. You can't imagine what a noise those beasts make. They blow, and stir, and dream.'

'And over there, what's that rising in the darkness?'

'That's our church, standing in a little field and hedged round with lime-trees whose coral shoots have been my delight all through the latter part of the winter.'

'You go to church?'

'Oh, yes. I'll tell you about that some other time, for now we've got to climb up a steep street. Hold my arm tight because of the gutters and don't be afraid.'

'Why should I be afraid? I'm with you.'

'In the days gone by, on the side of the hill there used to be a castle which was destroyed during the Revolution. With the stones of the castle, here as in many other places, most of the houses of the village were built. Our own house is old and quite spacious. It must originally have been part of the out-buildings of that castle. I'm not walking too fast? You're not out of breath?'

'No, certainly not, I'm just not talking.'

'Are you trying to tell me that I talk too much?'

'I like to hear you talk.'

'Suzanne, you haven't yet given me the right not to talk when I'm with you.'

'Not yet? Then do you think that I shall end by giving you that right, that special right?'

'No, no, Suzanne. That was a slip of the tongue. I'm talking, you hear, I'm talking! In telling you about what I love I am filled with delight which can only be compared to the delight the trees must feel in putting out their leaves and blossoms, the delight a mother must feel when she shows off her child, like the Virgin in the pictures of the old masters. You know, Suzanne, I'm looking forward to going with you to the Musée. I'm a painter and . . .'

'Mon Dieu! don't make too many plans, little boy, you frighten me.'

'Why "little boy"?'

Suzanne smiled in the dark.

'Don't take any notice, that's just a word from far away. I mean by that an expression from a part I once played. Oh, not too many plans, Philippe! You know I'm always scared when the future is mentioned.'

'So you don't want to come to the Musée?'

'I didn't say I didn't want to. But when I make a promise, even for such a simple matter, I always feel a sort of tug at my heart-strings. It seems to me that I'm surrendering a thousand lives for the sake of a single one.'

'If I want to take you to the Musée it's to explain something to you. . . .'

'And what do you want to explain to me, monsieur mon professeur?'

'You're not going to put me off. I want to explain to you the difference between the poetry of life and that of our works even when those are of the best. But look, we're almost there. By daylight you'll see the village and the valley from this terraced street. This is our doorway. It's old and of real stone, not of cement like most of what is built to-day. I'm speaking of things as if you could see them.'

'But I do seem to see them. You speak of them with such faith.'

'Now we're crossing the outer court.'

'Wait a moment!' exclaimed Suzanne. 'I hear something extraordinary. It sounds as if people were singing in chorus.'

'Yes, yes, come along. You'll hear still better in a second.'

The young man pushed open a door. Holding Suzanne by the arm he went a few paces through a tiled, dimly lighted hall. Then another door opened and the two young people went forward in a flood of light.

Suzanne was to remember later with a poignant emotion the sight that met her eyes. It was a big square room, where several lamps were burning, but in addition it was brightly lit by the leaping flames of a great wood fire. A table was laid, not in the middle of the room but on the side nearest the wall

One could see rustic chairs, white linen, flowered plates, stone jugs, loaves of bread on a wooden platter. At the far side of the room there were a grand piano and a small old-fashioned organ. A man was at the keyboard of the organ and drew from it sounds that reminded one of an oboe. Near him were grouped five or six people, women, girls, young men, who were singing softly but fervently in full harmony a piece which was unfamiliar to Suzanne but which seemed to her seraphic. Four doors opened on to this brightly lighted room. These doors were constantly opening noiselessly and other people, other children, slipped into the room, singing as if song were their natural way of breathing. It seemed to Suzanne that there were perpetual relays of singing children, like cherub musicians, emerging from under the furniture, breaking out from the walls, springing from the hangings, music on their lips, music in their hearts, and that they had been singing not merely from their entrance but from the beginning of all time. And all these voices blended, parted, and mingled again to utter simple words celebrating the simplest of ideas. hope, trust, obstinate faith in happiness in spite of storms, unswerving desire for justice in spite of evil-doers, love and harmony between reconciled souls.

Finally came a long chord. It seemed as though the waves of sound from this warm and radiant cell did not issue merely to fade on the threshold but to spread endlessly over space, victoriously advancing over fields and meadows, crossing forests and rivers, waking the towns and penetrating the clogged ears of suffering mankind all over the face of the earth.

The organist left the keyboard, rose, smiled, and coming forward put out his hands, and said in a beautiful voice, though low and somewhat shy.

‘Mademoiselle Pasquier, we are all happy in this house to . . . to . . . forgive me. . . .’

He could say no more. All the children cried out together:

‘We must call her Suzanne! Do say that you don’t mind our calling you Suzanne!’

Suzanne began to laugh. There was a moment of confused excitement. Philippe's voice rose above the tumult, crying: 'You don't know every one. I must introduce them. Here are my father and mother and little Alexis whose head you have under your hand, and here are our Céline and Pierre, her boy. And this one is Marie and that one Catherine. Thérèse you've already met. And lastly here's Madeleine, big sister to all of us. And now let's sit down to table, for it's growing late and everybody here is hungry.'

Of that first evening at the *Cavée des Portes* Suzanne would always retain a memory, exciting, intoxicating, confused, and delightful, rich with bright images and dancing shadows, a memory of laughter and merry shouts, a hint of happy tears, leaping flames on the hearth, embers glowing red, the taste of a young sparkling wine, a scent of verberna tea, prattling talk and sudden silences, a little girl of fifteen singing *The Leper's Lament*, in a small, true voice, endless conversations under a dying lamp whose wick was beginning to char, a whitewashed bedroom with a wide fire-place where a log was still burning, cool, well ironed sheets and right in the middle of the bed a burning-hot stone bottle, a country smell of aromatic plants and faint mustiness, and, a final memory before dropping asleep, the last glimmer from the embers still pulsing on the ceiling and the shadow of the rafters from minute to minute growing broader and blacker.

IX

IN a composition well known to lovers of music and engravings, the painter Rosenthal has depicted John Sebastian Bach surrounded by his family. The master is seated at the clavichord. Ten of his children are gathered round him. The eldest is playing the violin, the rest are singing in chorus. A woman, mother or servant, is busy in the shadows laying the table. In the foreground is a bassinet of carved wood whose invisible occupant is no doubt singing after its own

fashion. A little girl crouching on the ground is trying to attract a cat; and although she is quite tiny one can readily imagine that while playing she can add her weak treble to the family *ensemble*. A basket full of linen is pushed under a table. One of the cupboards is open. It is certainly not the picture of an austere, meticulously ordered household, it is a spectacle of life, of a life burdened with cares and servitudes, but adorned by love, grace, and fervour.

The educated visitor was bound to be put in mind of that charming old picture when he came for the first time into the home of Jérôme Baudoin, especially at meal-times, for then the whole family would be gathered together. The very fact of this reunion was arrived at in an odd way. The children and visitors might be some of them in the garden, others in their rooms, others in the studio at the top of the house. The idea of ringing a bell or sounding a gong had long ago been given up. The first to arrive would go to the piano and begin to sing. Very quickly a second voice and a third would join the first. Warned by this music growing louder every moment, the scattered members got ready and hurried to join the party. The last stragglers realized, even from afar, by the volume and richness of the chorus, that it would be inexcusable to keep the others waiting, and they would make haste to arrive before the final chord.

When the choir was complete and the last bar had been sung, the whole clan sat down to table. This method called for a certain amount of musical skill and discipline, but it left room for plenty of variety in the family life. For instance, dinner was served at all sorts of times, between seven and ten. Sometimes two or three of the children would be obliged to spend the day in Paris. They came back by the last train, and it was on hearing the whistle of the local that the hungriest began to gather round the organ or the piano to run through a cantata.

Hosts, children, servants, one and all could sing. With the Baudoins singing was not looked upon as an exceptional display of a skilled art but rather as one of the elementary

manifestations of life. The Baudoin children had hardly emerged from infancy when they opened their mouths and sang with perfect simplicity and with a dignity and sweetness which luckily never reminded one of school exercises. Music to the Baudoins was very like natural breathing, the exercise of a simple, easy function in which body and soul played each its fraternal part. Besides this, all the children played some instrument, not, to be sure, like virtuosos, but freely and easily, with originality and taste. In that big low room there was always to be seen a cello, a flute, a horn, or a bassoon lying about on the furniture. Tested and matured by centuries of loving study, the very shape of these instruments is to the eye a delight and a presage of beauty. Their materials even, rare wood, ivory, silver, or polished brass, are precious and worthy of respect.

Jérôme Baudoin was a musician by vocation and not by profession. He was the son of the celebrated Amédée Baudoin, a distinguished Sanskrit scholar and one of the patriarchs of modern philology. In France, where the family traditions are very exacting, Jérôme, in honour of his name and in order not to stray too far from the vast shadow that his father, like a great oak, cast around him, had himself studied at the School of Oriental Languages. He had become what in university phraseology is called an Arabist. Oh, not a travelling nomad Arabist, like Marçais, for instance, but rather a library Arabist. He had married when very young one of the daughters of the engraver Bellefont, who lived at L'Isle-Adam, and who, as a disciple of Karl Daubigny, never wearied of depicting the valley of the Oise, with its wooded slopes, its forest, and its mist-impierled meadows.

Following the emphatic advice of old Amédée Baudoin, Jérôme, in the early days of his marriage, had undertaken a journey through Islamic lands for purposes of study. That was how it came that the first of their children, Madeleine, was born in Cairo. But, in the meanwhile, old Baudoin had died at Nesles, at the Cavée des Portes, on the little family property. Jérôme had hastened back to France, leaving without regret

an Orient to which he had had no time to become attached. Doubtless he would have only a modest income, but it would be possible for him to augment it by means of linguistic work or translation which would not oblige him to live constantly in Paris. So Jérôme had settled down at Nesles, in his father's house. He had been able during those happy years to follow out his design and live in the country he loved. He had worked in a steady, leisurely fashion for publishers of dubious stability and not unfamiliar with bankruptcy, and thus he had kept going, almost by a miracle, a modest establishment enlarged year by year by more lives and increasing cares. Antoinette Baudoin had given him eight children, all living, all beautiful and healthy, and all, as Suzanne had noted at first glance, bearing a wonderful family likeness in that at first they seemed utterly unlike the children of other clans. They were all gracefully built, and held themselves very straight. They had clear-cut features, high white foreheads, and silky, wavy hair. All loved music and none had taken it up as a profession. Jérôme had taught them to read and to play some instrument, for he was interested in all kinds. Mme Baudoin had trained them to sing. She had her own personal, inimitable method of holding her head, of opening her mouth, forming the sounds, placing the voice, taking breath. She had also a remarkable repertory of old songs, carols, plaintive ballads, and roundelays. Music seemed to be the paradoxical bond, the supreme, the ethereal concern of this astonishing family. Little by little, the children found their way towards their chosen careers. Philippe had become a painter, Marc a wood carver, Hubert was studying for a degree in science, Madeleine was a skilled tapestry-worker, but music remained the true interpreter between their souls, their secret language, their eucharistic food.

In 1914 Jérôme was an officer in the reserve of the 276th infantry regiment. He fought on the Ourcq, and had been wounded, on 5th September, at Villeroy, not far from Péguy, whom he blamed himself for not having known more intimately or seen more often during his four weeks of war. He

had received, like Péguy, a bullet wound in his head. The projectile had not killed him, but passing from temple to temple it had severed the two optic nerves. It was a fortnight later, at Chartres where he was being treated, that Jérôme learnt from the surgeon the nature of his trouble and that it was incurable. Out of the prostration into which this bitter news threw him, he emerged one day full of resignation and even of courage, ready to believe that the love of his wife, the affection of his eight children, and the enjoyment of music would perhaps save him from despair. And indeed, in the end, all this had saved him. He had offered himself fervently to music and music had restored his serenity, confidence, and joy. He would say: "After all I've been lucky. I haven't suffered much in my body. It's a perfectly clean, simple mutilation. When I think of my comrades, those I used to hear shrieking near me, at Chartres, during my cure—yes, my cure, for my wounds healed up very quickly—when I think of my boy Philippe's injury, which suppurated for three months and had to be operated on several times . . . No, really, I can call myself lucky. And as for these bouts of neuralgia, I am beginning to get used to them. . . ." Two or three times a year, attacks of facial neuralgia would oblige him to withdraw from every one for several days at a time. Then he would shut himself in his room so as not to distress his children, and would struggle with his pain in strict solitude. And then the attack would pass and Jérôme would return to his family, smiling and serene, walking as the blind do, not bent towards the ground, but with his sightless eyes gazing into the distance and up towards the sky.

On the ground floor of the house there was a large lobby where all sorts of coats and cloaks, shawls and hats hung on wooden pegs. On the right of this lobby one went into the large apartment that we, for want of a more exact word, call a common room, but to which the Anglo-Saxons give the name of living-room, suggesting thereby that the greater part of family life is spent there.

It was there that the Baudoins took their meals and made

their music. It was there, in the winter, that the main fire of the house was kept burning. It was there that the little ones in the evening did their preparation and copied out their tasks. It was there that the daughters composed delicate tapestry, knitted, mended, and wove wool, for Jérôme Baudoin only wore clothes made from stuffs woven at home by his womenfolk. It was there, quite often of an evening, that Thérèse, who had a fine voice of good quality and rather deep, would read aloud for her father and the rest a few pages from some choice work. It was there that after dark they lit the three big brass lamps under which would be grouped those who had to use their eyes and their fingers.

Adjoining this common sitting-room were the pantry and kitchen, which could also be entered straight from the courtyard. Antoinette Baudoin and the servant Céline reigned over this part of the house, but there was nothing tyrannical about their rule. At any moment the children would dart in to snatch a crust or a bit of fried potato. They were immediately caught and claimed for some small duty, for which quite often they cheerfully volunteered. They had to draw the wine, husk the beans, scrape out the bottom of a pan, fetch logs, and fill cans of water. Mme Baudoin had long slender hands which housework had not damaged. She was always able to wash her hands quickly, slip out of her white overall, and go and seat herself at the piano to show one of the younger ones the best way of tackling a passage. Certainly, understood and carried out in this manner, the housework was not too much of a drudgery. Tasks were always performed, and without any serious squabbles, but they were performed in a happy-go-lucky fashion. Everything in this Baudoin household seemed to be undertaken haphazard and the result was always a complete success.

As soon as Jérôme Baudoin returned from the war he installed himself in the ground-floor rooms, which, if one were facing the house, would be on the left of the lobby. He was then new to his experiment, and he thought that he would never dare to move about freely and would have to enclose his

life within the narrowest limits. But, little by little, day by day, he had patiently mastered the surrounding darkness. He began to wander round the house, go up to the next floor, and even to the attic, go down to the cellar, and make his way with hands outstretched through the long row of rooms occupied by the children and the visitors. All these rooms opened on the tiled corridor, which had some steps but was well lighted, All the older children had rooms to themselves, for the house was spacious, but all in their young days had slept in the little dormitory where the wooden cots were superimposed like berths in a ship's cabin and were occupied during the year of this story by Catherine, little Marie, Alexis, who was ten years old, and the servant's child.

From the description of this legendary household one might suppose that it had been spared the lesser and greater trials of life by a beneficent providence, but that would be a mistake. The Baudoins had enjoyed no special privileges in respect of measles or chicken-pox. At the *Cavée des Portes* they suffered from mumps and ear-ache as elsewhere, but what was unusual was the tact they exercised in dealing with their troubles. When sickness came knocking at the door, it was received like any other caller without any fuss, and the illness, apparently surprised at causing so little sensation and getting so little notice, would finally give way and go off to try its luck elsewhere.

Jérôme's entire family treated with the same amiable indifference the most harassing questions of money. The pension for war-blindness, anyhow a very modest amount, the various earnings of the family, all put together only amounted to a very small income, and moreover a very variable one, but it was the habit of the members of the clan to refer to this unpleasant subject as little as possible and to rub along on a minimum of expense. It was only Hubert, who was rather impetuous and had to go very often to Paris for his studies, who sometimes asked for money a little too eloquently. Then Madame Baudoin would kiss him lightly on the forehead and whisper:

'You know, Hubert, we have to economize.' Then the boy would laugh and reply aloud:

'But, mother, economizing means being careful with money. To be careful with it you must first of all have it. Give me a little money, mother, to economize with.'

Then everybody would laugh, and in the end the money would be forthcoming. All these problems were approached by the members of the clan with such tactfulness and good humour that the visitor would very quickly give up the idea of judging this household by ordinary standards. From time to time some luxurious car would be seen drawing up before the *Cavée des Portes*: the Baudoins received and entertained at their family table friends who had come from afar, friends who, one heard by chance, bore a distinguished name, friends who knew each child's name and were only too pleased to spend a night or two in a room on the first floor, a room with white-washed walls, and who slipped into place in the choir or in the general conversation as though they had never had in their lives any other preoccupations but these.

There was much else that could be said about the domestic economy of the Baudoin household. Neither time nor work had the same value as in other families. For instance, when it was a nice warm evening, Jérôme would clap his hands and say: 'Antoinette, get the children together and pack a hamper. We'll go for a picnic in the Fonds de Nesles.' Forthwith, in the most natural way in the world, all would drop their work and get ready to go off. Some of them would wrap the bread and fruit in a white napkin. Others would busy themselves harnessing the donkey and cart with which on Fridays the marketing was done under the trees at L'Isle-Adam. Should a casual visitor express some surprise at seeing a whole family drop its work and abandon the house, leaving all doors open, the blind man would answer simply: 'We can't hope to have such a lovely warm evening every day. So we must make the most of it. Come along too if you like. The children will dance on the grass and we shall sing the cantata with two flutes. You know: "Sheep may safely graze."'

On other occasions Mme Baudoin would say: 'We've nothing left to make jam with. The blackberries ought to be ripe up there on the plateau. We'll go and pick some. Come on, children, get the baskets.'

The whole family would go to the plateau. They busied themselves for a couple of hours, sometimes longer, and brought back two or three kilos of berries which were boiled in preserving pans. It never occurred to any one to work out the price per kilo of the blackberries. A delicious smell of jam pervaded the house, a smell beyond price, and by the next morning all this precious winter provision had been gobbled up by young and old.

When the house was in need of repair, Jérôme, having been informed, would clap his hands and gather together the males of the tribe. Thereupon every one turned to, as bricklayer, blacksmith, or tiler. It was thus that the Baudoins, with their own hands and not too unskilfully, had renewed with small flat tiles the entire roofing of the house. It was thus that Philippe, that delicate artist, could have been seen on a scaffolding distempering in old rose the whole of the front wall of the house, and inscribing on it in black lettering his father's motto, accepted by the entire clan 'Plus c'est en vous.'

On the right of the entrance court there were two or three roomy coach-houses, one of which was used as a stable for the donkey, and the others for storing all sorts of old tools, work-benches, anvils, axes, and lathes. That was the place to go and rummage when there was something to be made or mended. This marvellous collection of junk, accumulated without order by succeeding generations of Baudoins, was always able to provide the oddment required for completing a job.

The blind man liked to make his way alone among the nooks and corners of his old family home. He had very quickly resumed possession of the garden, which was laid out in two terraced slopes facing the Hérouville plateau and the noonday sun. Water was pumped up to the vegetable garden by means of a creaky old bucket-wheel which grandfather Amédée Baudoin had installed long ago, in imitation of the

oriental *norias*. Twice a day in the summer the children joined forces to turn the big wheel of the machine, and filled a tank, whose water, warmed during the day, was poured in the cool of evening on the parched flower-beds.

There were also, in this garden which was not large enough to be called a park, all sorts of retreats, groves, and arbours, such as are generally found in old provincial properties. Jérôme used to go there to meditate during the warm hours of the day. On his return he would say: 'I put my hand on the ground. The onion beds must be watered or the seed will be wasted. . . . The lettuces are beginning to bolt. . . . The basil has made a good start: its first leaves are formed and beginning to smell good . . .'

From the vegetable garden he could find his way alone to the wood, which contained some fine oaks and which extended the little estate towards the north. This wood was preceded, as a symphony might be by a prelude, by a strange kind of grove which Jérôme accounted for thus. 'Each time a child is born to me, I have a tree planted. Look, come along with me. I know them all quite well. Here are Thérèse's chestnut-tree, Hubert's acacia—mind these big thorns!—Marc's poplar, which is growing faster than its godfather, although it's in rather too dry a spot. Here, on the right, are Marie's little elm and Catherine's lime-tree and Philippe's ash. Not one is missing. But if ever one should be it wouldn't mean anything. We're not superstitious in our family, and if one of the trees should happen to die, we'd plant another. That's how forests have to make a start, in the beginning. This will be our forest. . . .'

Again he would say, picking a blade of grass which he held to his nostrils: 'My mother taught us to brew drinks out of everything. Oh, not only from dittany, but delicious drinks from all sorts of plants. You shall taste them. They smell wonderfully of the meadows, the gardens, the sunken paths, the woods, the stubble fields, the fallow land, and the parched hill-sides. You'll see how good they are. And then, too, we have our vineyard. . . .'

The Baudoins owned, on the border of the plateau, one of the last two vineyards of the district. Little by little, wine has left the Île de France, but the Baudoins held on and continued to cultivate a vineyard which gave them a great deal of trouble and yielded, one season in three or four, enough grapes to make a harsh pale wine which was drunk by the family and of which they were very proud.

Jérôme, gaining assurance day by day, would walk about alone with careful steps along the muddy lanes of the plateau. He would also go down to the village and would greet people in passing, directly he heard a voice, or the sound of a tool, or the creaking of a window. He had a very sharp sense of any obstacle or danger. One day he was seen from afar, walking along a lane across which a horse had stopped, perfectly motionless. The blind man was holding his stick at some distance from the ground. Going as he was, he was bound to run his head against the animal's flank and drop his stick between its legs. The spectators were about to call out to him when, from afar, they saw him pull up short. Had he become aware of the smell, the breath, or, even less, the mere warmth exuding from that living flesh? No one could tell. But he was seen to stop, and then retrace his steps and take another path.

Such was this little world of the Baudoins in the spring of the year 1921, this little world, tried and tested, proud, happy, and radiant of soul.

X

HAVING reached the top of the stairs, Suzanne and Philippe paused, breathless both of them from having climbed too quickly. A blue quivering daylight fell from a skylight framed in the roofing. A small spider, hanging from an invisible thread, suddenly took fright and began to climb back towards the rafters. The two young people looked at each other and smiled. At last Suzanne said:

'Where are you taking me now?'

'To see a part of the house we never show.'

'What an honour!'

'I assure you that this attic, which we grandiloquently call the studio, is not on show on ordinary occasions. But it can happen, as it does to-day, Suzanne dear, that we come along with someone we really love and from whom we don't wish to conceal anything.'

'Really?' said Suzanne. 'And I am this person you like so much? I'm flattered, monseigneur!'

'Yes, that's right, make fun of me! Perhaps I brought it on myself. And yet I took the precaution of slipping in an artful plural. I said, "someone we really love." You must admit, Suzanne, that that is far from being a declaration of love. It's terribly collective. Oh, and another thing, mademoiselle: the people we love very much, that we love enough to drag them up here, must not be put off by a certain amount of disorder and dust, or even by an inoffensive spider out for a ramble.'

'What precautions, sire! How can I tell you without discredit that I accept spiders but draw the line at mice?'

'You needn't worry about the mice. I know them every one by their pet names. But to-day I bundled them all off to the loft. They won't disobey me. Nothing to worry about. You are still out of breath: we climbed too quickly.'

'Yes, that's it. You seemed bent on getting rid of the others, your brothers and sisters. Yes, it looked as if you were playing at hide and seek.'

'Go ahead! Tease your poor Philippe! Does it displease you that I should sometimes wish to have you to myself for a few minutes?'

'And for what reason should you seek this wonderful solitude, monsieur?'

'The better to see you, mademoiselle.'

'You reply like the wolf in the story of Little Red Riding-hood. No, I'm not really out of breath. Are we going to stay long on these stairs? It seems to me that stairs play a considerable part in our meetings, Philippe.'

Standing on a rickety stair, her back against the wall, all flushed from the climb, her breast heaving with her quick breathing, Suzanne was such a delight to the eye that the young man suddenly dropped on one knee.

'Ah, let me, let me,' he stammered. 'This is not Philippe and Suzanne. A passer-by, a stranger seeing you thus, couldn't help bending his head and bowing very low and dedicating a thought, possibly even a prayer, to all the graciousness of life. And now that's done, the prayer is said. Let's go into the studio.'

The door turned creaking on its ancient hinges, and suddenly Suzanne gave a cry of surprise.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Is it possible? Me, me, me, and again me! It's too much, Philippe! Don't you know it's too much? Do you know that you are going to make me blush, that I'm genuinely embarrassed? I'm going to cross your studio at a run with my eyes shut. You've caught me in a trap.'

What the Baudouins called the studio was a large panelled room situated under the roof, and flooded with a cold light from a glazed bay through which could be seen a broad patch of dappled sky. There were to be seen old cabinets overflowing with sketch-books and engravings, there were plaster casts covered with a light fluff of dust, easels, sculptors' benches, chisels, mallets, heavy blocks of oak, a rectangular palette, splashed with colours like the droppings of fabulous birds, a white-tiled stove, chests with half-opened drawers, a medal cabinet, a glass case full of statuettes, rickety old arm-chairs, a sofa draped in a large cashmere shawl, and crowds of other things to which Suzanne could not give the slightest attention, so taken up was she in gazing at a hundred pictures of herself, a hundred brilliant pictures full of verve and movement, some sketched in charcoal, others in water-colour, others again painted in oils with a full brush, some lightly pinned to the wall like so many bright butterflies, some again completely finished, varnished, and enclosed in heavy frames; in short, the work, the entire ardent, enthusiastic, persevering work of two

whole years at the very least. Suzanne's eyes flew from one picture to another, each time with an exclamation of surprise as she discovered some aspect of her life, her profession, or her story.

'Ah!' she said, 'here is Andromaque on her knees in her mourning draperies. This is Helen, I recognize her. You've sketched her at the very moment when she is making that ridiculous Pandarus sing "Love, love, nothing but love." Do you remember Pandarus, monseigneur? Here is the living statue of Hermione. She is about to leave her pedestal and fall into the arms of Leontes. You are a generous painter, Philippe. Here is Barberine, with her pointed head-dress. You have seen and captured everything and forgotten nothing. . . .'

'Don't talk only of Barberine, look at Suzanne.'

'Later, later. I like Barberine. Oh, that poor Donna Elvire! Her eyes are full of tears. I'm positive she is just saying: "Go, I beg of you, either for love of yourself, or for love of me." And here I recognize Roxane. She is offended. She is hurt. She murmurs in an almost inaudible voice that terrible little word: "Go."'

Suzanne stretched out her arm and, with eyes suddenly fixed, declaimed:

*'Pour la dernière fois, perfide, tu m'as vue,
Et tu vas rencontrer la peine qui t'est due.'*

'No, no,' protested Philippe, 'I declare to you that I deserve no punishment and that I do not love Atalide. Don't think so much about the theatre. Look at Suzanne as well: she is everywhere and very much alive. Look, there is Suzanne combing, not a wig, but her own beautiful hair, her lovely living hair, in front of the mirror, her hair of which one cannot say for certain whether it is golden, flaxen, tawny, or flamboyant like that of the late Doctor Raymond Pasquier, her father. Here is Suzanne reading, in the warm glow of a little lamp.'

'Where have you seen me reading like that?'

'I have seen you, believe me, and if I haven't seen you I've dreamt you, which is just as authentic. Look, here is Suzanne

strolling along the quai de Montebello and contemplating the cathedral. There is Suzanne smiling, and here is Suzanne singing. And here is even Suzanne in a temper. With whom? Surely not with her painter Philippe.'

'Surely not! You are an excellent painter. Besides, I never get into a temper except in my parts on the stage.'

'You do love the stage, don't you, mademoiselle?'

She half closed her eyes, smiled, and said very softly:

'I was given an Italian play to read which there was some thought of playing in Paris and where the words "fiction" and "reality" constantly occur. How can I explain to you, Philippe, that I only feel reality, I only properly understand it, on the stage. Why do you look at me with such anxious eyes? I explain myself very badly, but that's the only way I can say what I mean. Why don't you say something? I don't like that frown gathering between your eyebrows. You put me a question and I answered it quite simply.'

And as Philippe raised his arms in a gesture of worry and embarrassment the girl went on quickly:

'You ask me if I love the theatre; what a question! I would rather be Andromaque on the stage than a happy wife and mother in real life. And I think we are all like this. And no doubt there is one thing, or several, which you love in the same way, you too, monseigneur. I say "monseigneur" . . . Let me ask you a question, Philippe. Have you ever met any princes, Philippe?'

The young man nodded vaguely and evasively. But already Suzanne was running on:

'In the spring of 1913 I did a big tour in Europe with Mme Sarah Bernhardt. We played scores of times before kings and princes. Occasionally they received us after the performance and uttered a few commonplaces. Most of them looked more like lackeys or grooms. The only one who looked like a prince was our young leading man, Jacques Degorce, and then only when he was actually playing. There are no princes except in Racine or Shakespeare. What are you thinking about, monseigneur?'

'I am just thinking that to complete this visit I must show you Bluebeard's chamber.'

'Bluebeard's chamber?'

'Yes, the room where all the costumes are hanging.'

'And must I see that too?'

'It might be advisable.'

'I've not even had time to look at all these marvellous faces of me which you've collected here to confound me.'

'You will come again. We shall come again. I shall go on working. I shall do your portrait again at least a thousand times.'

'Are you sure that you can work as fast as that?'

'Oh, I shan't have to hurry myself'

'Are you sure that you will be given time?'

She was smiling, suddenly yielding to the demon of mockery. She had suddenly, and without the slightest reason, bethought herself of the unhappy Testevel, that melancholy friend of her brother Laurent's, that tall young man with the gait of a giant, who had worshipped her for years and whom she never tired of teasing. He used to wear loose fancy ties with white spots. Suzanne would give a sharp tug at the ends. Testevel would knot the tie again. She would undo it again a hundred times over. And the giant, like a docile elephant who responds with lazy deliberation to the prick of the keeper's goad, was always ready to kneel, always ready to flap his ears and trumpet a salute.

Suzanne thought: 'Mon Dieu! how young I was!' Then she repeated in a voice into which there had crept a note of doubt: 'Are you sure you will have the time?'

With his hand on the handle of the door, Philippe looked round once more at the studio with its dazzling array of pictures, and his eyes pleaded silently: 'Is it possible, Suzanne dear, that this flame of adoration does not warm you, fire you, raise you to the skies?'

He shook his head as though brushing away a swarm of thoughts, and said, taking Suzanne by the arm:

'Come along, now! Here is Bluebeard's chamber.'

'But I don't see any blood or any bodies.'

'I'll open the presses and display our treasures.'

Along the wall there were three or four large presses, and all round the room, in the angle between the roof and the floor, stood tallboys, coffers, bins, and seamen's chests. Philippe began opening the doors and lifting the lids. He pulled out the most surprising rig-outs, furs, Inverness cloaks, Rumanian peasants' *cojocs*, gauchos' jackets, silk-embroidered Moldavian dresses, and gold-braided boleros. Then came dresses with frills, then dresses with panniers, old-fashioned frock-coats with stand-up collars and wavy skirts, hunting costumes, military tunics whose gold lace still gleamed in the dusk, then homespun dresses, a canon's cassock, a dolman with beaver collar, a muslin dress, stiff with starch, like those worn by the ladies of the imperial court in Winterhalter's pictures, and a thousand other extravagant garments which he took out of their cases and displayed under the skylights and then allowed to subside on an old rush matting which covered the floor of the garret.

'But it's a regular costumier's shop,' exclaimed Suzanne in astonishment, 'a real treasure house, Philippe! Philippe! Gently, carefully! Philippe, just look at this bodice of pearl-grey satin. It's quite exquisite. Take care how you handle it, monseigneur!'

'Don't be afraid. I shall come back with my big sisters this evening and pick them all up.'

'But what's the meaning of this enormous collection of old clothes, and how did you come by them all?'

'Heavens! we don't know. They're heirlooms. They've come down to us through several generations.'

'And what do you do with them all?'

'First and foremost, we wear them. Haven't you noticed? Just now I'm wearing great-uncle Bellefont's box-coat. When I'm tired of it, I shall take on this Spanish cape for the summer evenings. It's lined with red and perhaps a bit gaudy, but we all love it and wear it by turns. For I must tell you that we wear all these old garments for three months, as much as we feel inclined, and then we relegate them to Bluebeard's

chamber. When we come across them the following year, they look quite new to our eyes and they delight us once more.'

'But how about moths, my dear Philippe? What do you do about moths?'

Philippe gave a shocked smile.

'Moths!' he said. 'Moths never come here. We lay aromatic plants everywhere. Surely you can smell thyme and savory and wormwood and tansy. And then at the turn of the year we burn various herbs. No, indeed, we've never had any diplomatic complications with moths. They wouldn't dare. . . . What have you found there?'

'A shepherdess's frock. And now here is a dress of white linen! And a taffeta domino. Just throw this domino over my shoulders. Oh, I wish I had a mask.'

'Quite easy,' said Philippe, 'here is a little black velvet one. And would you like a fan? Here is the fan that my grandmother Noémi Baudoin carried when she went to the Tuileries. You could wear ten masks and still I should always recognize you. Even if it was only your little finger showing, or one of those wavy curls which flutter on the back of your neck, I should recognize you. No, no, I am being very matter-of-fact, and I'm not making love.'

Suzanne unfastened the mask, stretched out her hand, and said in that light, musical, winged voice that she used on the stage:

'Have I really forbidden you to make love to me?'

Before the young man had time to recover from his surprise she added hastily:

'And if I have forbidden you, monseigneur, it was very sensible of me. But you are not going to make me believe that you only wear these fascinating garments when you dig in the garden, go to market on Fridays, make fruit pies and fritters, and receive your friends.'

'Oh, no, on wet days we dress up.'

'Dress up? What for?'

'Oh, nothing; just for fun.'

'Philippe,' said the girl softly, 'we ought to put on a play.'

'Why, of course,' said Philippe. 'Ah! that's an idea that will delight every one.'

Then he added after a moment, with a note of peevishness in his voice:

'How you love the theatre!'

Suzanne pulled forward the hood of the domino, advanced a step, and declared suddenly in a voice full of sadness:

"Do not be surprised, Don Juan, to see me at this hour and in this array. . . ."

'Ah!' repeated the young man, with a rueful shake of the head, 'how you love the theatre! Then why have you left it, Suzanne?'

She had just let the mask and the domino slip to the floor. She said, addressing vacancy:

'Have I left it, Philippe?'

Then suddenly, in a serious voice, she replied to her own question:

'If I have left it, monseigneur, it is because I loved it. It is just because I love it.'

With the tip of her fan she touched the young man's shoulder and went on without a pause:

'What's all that noise and hullabaloo on the stairs?'

Philippe shrugged his shoulders.

'You can guess,' he said. 'It has at last dawned on them that we've come here. So here they are.'

'Aren't you pleased to see your brothers and sisters? I like them all and I'm beginning to grow fond of them.'

'Oh, I'm fond of them too,' said Philippe sulkily. 'But I hadn't yet had enough of our solitude.'

XI

ABOUT this promised outing Hubert Baudoin would only speak in veiled terms, with knowing winks and cryptic innuendos, mysterious precautions and cabalistic signs.

'First of all,' he said, 'we'll go up to the top of the hill so as

to give Suzanne a general view of our domain. After that, we'll come down again to you know where for the ordeal and the initiation. Hush! Mum's the word! I trust every one has understood.'

'But,' interposed a voice, 'have you obtained the necessary permission?'

'I've seen old Pacaud.'

'Have you got the passwords?'

'At any rate I've got the keys.'

'Have you got the accessories?'

'I've got the veil and the bandage. It was Madeleine who sewed them up.'

'And which day have you picked out?'

'The third day of the moon.'

'Splendid! We are agreed. Well, then, till to-morrow.'

Usually at the Baudouins' it was sufficient to mention the word *outing* to secure an immediate success and a unanimous agreement. This magic word always set up in the clan an excitement comparable to a call to action stations on a warship. The smallest outing, the shortest journey, took on the character of a regular expedition. The programme had to be discussed and the number of the participants settled. Many of them turned up by chance and only made their decision at the last minute. They had to hunt for each other, find each other, wait for each other, jostle each other, and argue endlessly.

'Well, but you wouldn't have me go out without having shaved?'

'Rats! You've only got about four whiskers and you want to make us waste a whole hour.'

'Buck up, I'm changing my shoes.'

'I shall be ready before you, I've nearly finished darning my stockings.'

'I'm sure I shall be ready first: I've only got to put the stock-pot on the fire and go upstairs and fetch a shawl.'

If the weather was cold every one set about getting hold of suitable clothes, and if by any chance it was hot every one planned to achieve a *dishabille* of pleasing elegance. All

this always took up a lot of time and entailed many confabulations. Doors and windows would be flung open in order to call out from one floor to another:

'Who's pinched the stick with the agate knob? It's the only one that suits me.'

'Alexis, this isn't the moment to begin cutting your toe-nails.'

'Yes, but I'm making holes in all my socks.'

'Catherine, why do you always bag the red Madras square?'

'Can any one tell me where's the silver belt? I bet it's still in Hubert's room. Whenever anything is missing it's always found in Hubert's room.'

'Paule, are we taking sandwiches?'

'You go on ahead, but say which way you're going and we'll catch you up.'

'No, we must all start out together.'

'Somebody has pinched the black velvet hat again without as much as a "by your leave."'

'I'm the one who cleaned the Russian boots, and now Philippe has gone and taken them; it isn't fair!'

The possessive adjective, which most people employ so constantly, was not much in favour with the Baudoins. They didn't say 'my sealskin cap' but 'the sealskin cap,' and this was certainly not a sign of indifference and self-denial, but a way of pointing out that each member of the clan considered that he had a natural right to all its possessions.

During the preparations for the outing the house seemed to be shaken by internal convulsions. Cavalry charges swept the corridor and the stairs groaned under living avalanches. Shutters banged in all directions. A song escaping from a casement would be caught up and answered by a voice from the kitchen and another from the depths of the cellar. Minutes, nay, an hour or more, would be occupied with these preliminaries. Sometimes even night fell upon them, but no one was dismayed: an outing had been planned for the sunny hours; no matter, it would be carried out as a nocturnal adventure. Nobody fretted. The Baudoins were everlast-

ingly unpunctual. Every one knew it, so no one resented it. Every reckoning with regard to the plans and movements of the Baudoins presupposed a qualifying coefficient, such as: 'They said three o'clock. So we've lots of time. No use expecting them before half past four or a quarter to five.' A mathematical mind could find exercise and entertainment in the contemplation of this apparent disorder. Three Baudoins were not to be reckoned as three times later than one Baudoin, but more probably nine times later, in virtue of the principle that delay in that particular family was in proportion to the square of the number of persons engaged in the operation. The delay, then, could be calculated according to what is called geometrical progression, so that when the family was to make a move in a body, as was frequently the case, it would start out very nearly on the hour though actually on the morrow of the day originally fixed. When all the chances were allowed for, one had no need whatever to worry about the Baudoins: for in the practice of their dilatoriness they exercised a constancy that almost amounted to punctuality.

In the case of an outing, the excursionists ended by gathering in the courtyard or the garden and starting on their way. Needless to say, they all wore garments drawn from Bluebeard's store, but they wore them so naturally that no one who met them saw anything odd in their appearance. Reds and blues blended on the shoulders of the Baudoins by a sort of miracle of adaptability, as on the mantles of the Virgin in the paintings of the old masters. No sooner was a First Empire busby perched on the head of a Baudoin infant than it lost all its strangeness and even all its aggressively military character and immediately became the friendliest and most innocent head-dress in the world. The Baudoins were not subject in the slightest degree to that kind of false shame which betrays itself in a sensitiveness to ridicule, and since they disdained ridicule, quite simply, ridicule was powerless to affect them. Never in the Baudoin clan did the women wear the short skirts which were then becoming so much the fashion. They were fond of long garments, scarves, capes, shoes with flat heels, and even

sandals with wooden soles, so that they had the look and gait of the people painted by Poussin, Claude, or even Louis David in their harmonious compositions.

These brief indications allow one to picture the entire party of the Baudoin children as they set out on the third day of the moon under the leadership of Hubert.

That young man was bare-headed, his fair rebellious locks abandoned to the breeze. He wore an embroidered leather jerkin, like a Hungarian peasant's, corduroy trousers faded by endless washings, and marvellous boots of gorgeous red leather.

'Attention, please,' he said; 'to-day I am the leader in charge of this expedition. So I shall walk in front and I shall give my arm to Suzanne whenever I think it necessary. Suzanne, you've chosen the crinoline which is called, I don't know why, after the Marquise de Pimatan. It suits you to perfection. You've only to lift a finger to become a Baudoin. I will have you note that I say all this in cold-blooded detachment. I am a botanist, a man of the laboratory. I am not an artist, but a budding scientist. The only member of the family who is not an artist! I need say no more.'

'You seem to be proud of it.'

'Certainly, I'm a great bragger. Listen, you others, we are going up to the five cherry-trees. . . . They are wild cherries. I fancy that long ago some people picnicked there on the grass. Possibly they were our forbears. They threw their cherry stones about them and that's how those fine trees sprang up. Suzanne, be careful, the ground is very rough. I think I shall put my arm round your waist.'

'And why, little boy?'

'To hold you up, perhaps, and also to annoy Philippe.'

'And are you so set on annoying your big brother?'

'Pff! All those people are sentimentalists. They think about nothing but sentimental love-making. Hop! Hop! They make me laugh. As for me, I adore love but I loathe sentimentality. If I admire Suzanne, for instance, it's merely because I worship beauty. As a matter of fact, I have founded

a club in Paris, the Club of the Indifferents. Our address is 27 rue de la Huchette. Up to date there are only three of us, but when we are twenty million, the world will be free of all this love-making nonsense. Hop!

'You 'll ruin the dress of the marquise . . . What is her name?'

With a flick of the finger Hubert disposed of all objections and remonstrances.

'I want to make Philippe mad and keep little Marc on the rack. For, you know, Suzanne, that Marc's got it too. Marc is another of these sentimentalists. He has already carved at least five statues of you, five statues in wood. Carving is his profession. Didn't you know about them? He hasn't shown them to you, those statues? But he 'll end by showing them to you. He's caught, he's labelled, hop! He's done for.'

He was chattering rather wildly, with a sort of childish lisp. At every moment he would seize Suzanne by the arm or round the waist so naturally and with such charming casualness that she never thought of objecting.

'I gather,' she said, 'that in this happy family you are the representative of virtue. I am delighted.'

'Mel not a bit of it! The representative of sublime indifference and philosophical disinterestedness; whereas these others, as many of them as you can see, are all infected, crawling with parasites, a worm at the heart of every one. I am the only one who is sound and free. I am the only one, Suzanne, to love you from the strictly aesthetic point of view. Hop! The only one, I tell you. Oh! you've pricked me!'

'I haven't pricked you, monsieur. It's you who have pricked yourself on the marquise's dress.'

'Why do you have pins sticking out all over the place? Very inconvenient for those who admire you from a strictly aesthetic point of view. I should like, though, to be able to put my arm round your waist whenever the necessity arises. Like this, out of friendliness, out of sheer enthusiasm. Hop! President of the Club of the Indifferentials!'

'You must agree that this pin is very useful for protecting

the marquise's gown, whose colour is very delicate, from the hands of clumsy people. Now I never prick myself.'

'Right! I shall know what to call you in the future. You shall be the pin-charmer! Now, here we are, at the cherry-trees. We'll sit down and wait for the rest of the party. Look at Marc. He's miserable because I've been alone with you for the last quarter of an hour. Marc is a terribly silent fellow. But inside he's all flames and molten lava. He never says a word, but takes it out on the doors. He gives himself away with the doors. Whenever you hear a door give a catastrophic bang you can be sure it's our silent Marc. Marc the mute. He's death to all doors and that's his way of expressing the intensity of his feelings. He has his revenge on doors and eatables. A giant in appetite, a champion at the sandwiches, and a demigod among the potato chips. Apart from that, he has talent and he's a splendid fellow. Hop! Hop!'

'"Hop!" why "Hop?" Until just now you didn't keep on saying "Hop."'

'You bet I didn't! I never say the same thing for two days running. I tell you again, Suzanissima, I'm the president of the Indiffs. Nothing could be clearer. And now, let's sit down. Here's a lovely clean stone, and it shall be your throne, lady of all our thoughts.'

One after another, in couples, in arguing groups, big and little, children and grown-ups, all the company arrived and flung themselves on the grass round Suzanne. The scattered conversation died out and suddenly there was a delicious silence during which nothing was to be heard but the strident chirp of the grasshoppers.

'Marc,' said Hubert at last, 'you're setting the fashion. You've got followers. This crowd of chatterboxes is learning to keep quiet. Listen for a moment, Suzie: Marc will perform a silent solo, a concerto for a single mute.'

Marc flushed violently and protested in a choking voice: 'No! No! Hubert! please . . .'

But Hubert was off and nothing could stop him.

'You know that when he leaves off playing his silence, one can spot it quite easily. Father said to him the other day: "Where are you, my boy? I don't hear you not speaking."'

'Oh, come, leave him alone,' said Philippe with a laugh.

'What! what! but I'm praising him. And I haven't told you everything. Oh, Marc! You'll hear him though. If you become aware of a strong husky voice in a corner, singing sentimental songs, well, you'll know it's Marc. Right! Right! I won't say another word. Look at our landscape.'

'Where is Nesles?' inquired Suzanne.

'That's wonderful!' continued Hubert. 'You've already been with us for several days and you ask where Nesles is. You're like all women, you have no bump of locality, and I bet that when you cross the Place de la Concorde you wonder which way to look for the obelisk.'

'I'm not quite so dense as you would like to make out, and if I were asked to point out a fool I should know just where to look.'

'Well answered, and well deserved,' exclaimed Philippe.

But Hubert, broken loose again, would not listen.

'You're just like our cousin Paule,' he went on, 'whom you see here before you, and who in full daylight will ask me where the sun is so as to know how to adjust her sunshade.'

'And you,' put in little Catherine, 'you reply that you can't see it because you're short-sighted. Aren't you ashamed of teasing Paule, who polishes your shoes whenever I've forgotten to do it?'

'Thanks for the shoes. Forgive me, Paule Sauvage—Paule, that's what I'm going to call you until to-morrow. And now no more of that. To be sure I'm short-sighted, and that's why I'm so exact and tidy. As soon as I take off my glasses, I can hardly see a thing. And so I go by instinct to where things are, and they have to be in their right places. And I can promise you that they are. If not . . . Isn't that so?'

'Oh!' murmured Paule. 'Oh, good Lord, what cheek!'

Thereupon every one began to laugh, for in his room, in the house, and wherever else he had been, Hubert managed to

achieve a miraculous disorder. Paule's remark did not appear to upset him. He stood up, threw back his hair with a youthful toss of the head, waved an arm, and went on:

'I'm short-sighted and it's most convenient. I only see what I'm able to see. But when I put on my glasses they fit me so well that I see better than any one else. Yes, yes, better than any one else, because each time it's a revelation and a surprise. I don't have time like you to get bored over details and slight differences. Each time I go straight to the truth. It's the great advantage I have over all you others. You're asking, Suze, where Nesles is? Well, Nesles is at your feet, like the rest of the universe.'

'From here,' said Thérèse, 'you can only see the spire of the church, and one of the square towers of the big farm where our friend, the poet Émile Henriot, lives.'

'And over there,' Philippe went on, 'over there, that double row of trees is the road from Pontoise through Vallangouyard to Picardy. And those trees on the other side are the wood of La Tour-du-Lay where we shall be going next week to pick lilies of the valley. And over there in the distance you can see the wooded hills which all have such delightful names; the Forêt du Lys, the Forêt de Carnelle, and the Forêt de l'Isle-Adam. And if we could see beyond we should find other little places and woods that we can never think of without a thrill of delight: Chantilly, Senlis, Ermenonville. It's wonderful, Suzanne, that these places should be so beautiful and have such lovely names. Over there, on the other side, towards the west, there's a tiny hamlet whose name in full is Wy-dit-joli-village. Isn't that sweet?'

'And Vauréal!'

'And Vigny! I like Vigny even better.'

'And Courdimanche!'

'And Luzarches! I should like to live at Luzarches, just on account of the name.'

'And I at Bellefontaine.'

'And you, Marc,' said Hubert, 'at Cramoisy, which is just by Creil and where one ought to be able to blush to perfection.'

'How lovely it is here!' sighed Suzanne.

'Yes, every time one takes the trouble to climb up to the plateau, one is rewarded,' murmured big sister Madeleine.

'First of all one sees more sky.'

'And at the same time one sees more earth. How do you explain that?'

'Look at that road over there, which winds round the hill like a creeper.'

'Quiet! Listen to the lark.'

'Where is it? I can hear it, but I can't see it.'

'One minute, while I look for it.'

'It's here,' said Hubert. 'I've already seen it: only, of course, I'm short-sighted. A tremendous advantage! The lark is straight up there, under that cloud in the shape of a wreath. One might think it was the Holy Spirit about to alight on our heads.'

'The lark is not going to alight on our heads, it'll fall like a stone in one drop, among the young wheat. And to think there are countries without larks!'

'What time is it?'

'Five o'clock.'

'We must get along,' said Philippe.

'For the ceremony?'

'Hush, you people!' scolded Hubert. 'Behave! I am the leader to-day and for the whole day. Suzanne, please take my arm. Now off! It's time. Up! Another day I'll tell you about the flowers. Another day I'll show you the fly orchis and the bee orchis. There are lots of those little orchids round here. Another day I'll introduce you to the wood sage. You touch the centre of the flower with a straw and the stamens curve backwards. That is how they deposit all their store of pollen on the back of the visiting insect. Oh! it's marvellous how happy I am to-day! Every man has a fixed portion of happiness to spend daily. We have, without being aware of it, a ration card of happiness, as we had for sugar and bread during the war. There are people who only spend one coupon a day.'

As for me, I spend the lot at once, and afterwards I shall be terribly poor and quite insufferable. You'll see, Suzanne.'

'Where are you taking me to, now,' she inquired.

'That's a secret, my pet.'

'And what have you got in your Tyrolese satchel?'

'The accessories, dear young lady.'

'The accessories for what?'

'For our ceremony.'

'And what ceremony, may I ask?'

'Suzanne, you're too inquisitive. Here you are, here's a jay's feather. All the others, who aren't short-sighted, would have walked over it. But I saw it, and I'm offering it to you. Wear it in your hair. But first look at it, and note how exquisite the colours are. Honestly, Suzanne, it's a marvellous creation. Sometimes I open my eyes and look about casually and I see no matter what—the keys of the maple swinging in the breeze, for instance—and I feel like shouting for joy. . . '

'Why are you stopping?'

'Because the moment has come, beloved Suzanne, and we're going to ask you to let us blindfold you '

The entire party had just come to a halt at the beginning of a grass track which ran between the copses towards the deepest part of the valley.

'Suzanne dear,' said Philippe, 'we're going to beg you to humour these young madcaps by allowing yourself to be blindfolded for a few minutes. They will explain their reasons. It's an idea of their own.'

'That's all right: I trust them.'

'Here is a well-padded silk bandage. It won't hurt your eyelids.'

'Now then,' said Hubert. 'It's for me to tie it. Can you still see anything, Suzanne?'

'Hardly anything. A small pebble at my feet.'

'The pebble won't give us away. In any case I'm going to put this scarf, this black lace mantilla, over your hair. You've no idea, Suzanne, how lovely the black is against your

golden hair. I'm not a painter like Philippe, but I see things just the same. Now, I'm going to take your arm again, and we're setting off. All the others are following behind us like a village wedding procession. Don't be afraid, I shan't let you trip up. You're in my hands like a cherished treasure. Do you notice something?

'I notice lots of things and in many different ways. What ought I to notice? And with what ought I to notice what you want me to notice?'

'With your nose, dear little person. With those dainty nostrils that are like apple blossom on its second day of flowering.'

'I can smell the green grass and some other scent that I can't be quite sure of identifying.'

'Those are the mingled scents of artemisia and mint, take the word of a botanical expert for it. And now, what do you smell?'

'I'm not very clever at recognizing smells.'

'Well! it's the smell of water.'

'But water has no smell.'

'Tap water, possibly not. But the water of our watercourse smells of earth, thunder-rain, and blessed vegetable decay. You have just crossed over a watercourse by a little wooden bridge, mademoiselle.'

'I put myself in your hands. I'm not even asking you where we're going.'

'You'll soon guess. Now wait. I'm going to open a door which the others will carefully close behind us. Do you hear me, you others?'

'The others don't say a word. We're no longer walking on the grass.'

'No, we're on fine gravel. We shall soon be there. Just a few more steps, my pet. And now, sit down.'

'What are you making me sit on?'

'On a very comfortable stone seat. Feel it with your hands. It's not cold. The sun has been warming it for part of the day. Does it mean anything to you, Your Majesty?'

'What could it mean to me?'

'Breathe, Suzanne dear.'

'I'm breathing. The air is good. Where are the others?'

'They are all round us. Can't you hear them moving about and laughing and jostling each other?'

'No. I hear a bird. What's that bird called?'

'It bears an honourable name. It's called the nightingale.'

Suzanne shook her head:

'You're wrong. The nightingale sings at night.'

'That's just it, Suzanne, the nightingale has begun to sing, because you're blindfolded and, for you, it's night. It's a delicate compliment.'

'Don't listen to him, Suzanne,' murmured Philippe. 'The nightingale sings both night and day; but, in the day-time most people don't hear it because they're too inattentive.'

'And is that really a nightingale I hear?'

'It's not *a* nightingale. It's *the* nightingale. The French never say: "I hear a cuckoo calling, I hear a thrush singing." They say: "I hear the cuckoo, the thrush, or the nightingale," because, according to them, it's always the same bird singing, every season since the beginning of the world.'

There was a long silence, then Hubert said again in his heavy lisping voice:

'Do you know, Suzanne dear, where you are at this moment?'

'How could I possibly know?'

'Is it nice for you here?'

'Yes. Very nice. It's pleasantly warm. Are you going to keep me wearing this bandage and scarf much longer?'

'No. The moment has come to free you from all that and give you back your eyes. First of all the scarf. Hop! And now for the bandage! Open your eyes, beloved Suzanne!'

Suzanne opened her eyes and saw first all the young people grouped in a ring round her and gazing at her with a sort of anxious curiosity. Then, as every one remained silent, she raised her head. She found herself in a garden, a peaceful garden whose soil was dark and powdery. Two long intersecting paths led away to meadows lit up with blossoming

trees. The horizon was hidden by curtains of poplars whose young foliage sang softly in the breeze. The evening sun shot through the green leaves long rays of light, friendly and poignant like the light of our memories. Suzanne gazed for several minutes in wonder at this simple landscape, so humanly touching and so snugly enclosed. Then she lowered her eyes and saw the square patches of earth with their seedlings and young shoots framed by edgings of aromatic plants. A spade with its shining blade was stuck upright among the sods of earth. One could also see a cord wound round a couple of wooden pegs like the yarn on a spindle; one could see large watering cans and a well whose edge and chain were still wet. Farther on, glass cloches, frames covered with straw, clumps of peonies in flower, clumps of leopard's bane and forget-me-not, mingling with sorrel and salad burnet, for in France there is never a kitchen garden without flowers. And beyond one could catch glimpses of a rose-arbour, cordon apple-trees, a bit of wall with its espaliers and trellis, and a tank in which a patch of heavenly blue was quivering.

'Where are you, Suzanne dear?' repeated Hubert in a voice from which all confidence was ebbing.

'I don't know,' she replied.

'You're in your grandfather Bruno Pasquier's garden,' said Philippe gently. 'You are sure to have come here when you were quite little. We were even afraid you might recognize the way you came. That explains the bandage and the scarf.'

Suzanne shook her head.

'Alas, no,' she said softly. 'I didn't recognize a thing.'

'Your brother Joseph,' went on Philippe, 'wanted to buy this garden, but the present proprietor didn't wish to sell. That doesn't really matter: for all the people round here it's still the Pasquier garden. It's from here that you all started, and we don't forget it. Those old pear-trees which you see over there were planted long ago by your grandmother Thérésine. They are hollow and worm-eaten, but they are still alive and they still bloom. Forgive us, Suzanne. Hubert was so keen on bringing you here. Perhaps he was wrong.'

'No, he wasn't wrong,' said Suzanne. 'But I didn't recognize a thing, and it grieves me to think so.'

'Don't be grieved, Suzanne. If ever you wish to do so you can take root again in the old soil of Nesles.'

Suzanne shook her head and made no reply.

XII

THIS lad, always in a hurry, always in the clouds, always absorbed in some whimsical thought, some unspoken, possibly inexpressible, wish—this lad from now on must be looked upon as a man. The voice is deep and masculine, though every now and then it modulates into almost childish tones. The neck is thick and muscular; and yet the lad is thin, and on either side at the nape there is a soft hollow where some curls of flaxen hair are to be found. Against the sun the cheek reveals a down which holds the light, quickening it and making it sing. Morning and evening, when Antoinette Baudoin kisses Hubert as he flits past—no sooner has the young man been caught than he slips away—she says with a smile: 'Really, you're getting prickly!' Never mind! it will be a long time yet before this restless youth, so lanky and so odd-looking, with his big hands and his long legs, ceases when in his mother's arms to be the baby she held against her heart, that baby whose hair had a fine and delicate fragrance which could never be defined in words since it was the odour of life itself.

'Really, you're getting prickly!' Hubert had only seven hairs on his chin and perhaps four on his lip. But he shaved them off once a week, a persistent practice which gave strength to this precious growth of his without, however, producing any increased luxuriance. The days elected by Hubert for his shave were for the whole family days of storm and stress. The matter was talked about from early morning. Then the lad went prowling about to sneak a razor from one and a brush from another. Then he installed himself in his room and preluded the undertaking with speeches, chants, and incan-

tations. Then he set to work, all windows open, so that the house from attic to cellar was kept informed, minute by minute, of the progress of the operation. Then howls and curses were heard; the operator had cut himself, as he never failed to do. Finally a noise of rushing waters announced to an astonished world that Hubert Baudoin would soon have completed his toilet and would appear in the light of day with a chin innocent of all superfluous growth. Thereupon Jérôme Baudoin, raising his blank eyes towards the upper regions from whence came this glorious uproar, would say resignedly: 'If we were all to behave like this, the house would really have the appearance of a lunatic asylum.'

Hubert then, that morning, appeared at the window, staunching with a towel the blood that dripped from two or three gashes, and he immediately called out:

'How 's this, Suzanne? You 're alone in the garden, alone on the terrace, like young Mélisande at her casement! I 'm coming, give you my word. And you shall have the handsel of my shave!'

Without even waiting for a reply, the young man leapt back into the room, shaking floors and walls; then he burst into song, imitating all the instruments of an orchestra. A moment later he could be heard tumbling downstairs, emitting all sorts of wild noises. In another moment he was walking in the garden at Suzanne's side

'The handsel, Suzanilla?'

'No, thank you, you 're much too clumsy. You 've cut yourself again.'

'I tried to shave too closely. Love of perfection.'

'No, perfection consists in being just right.'

'We 'll say no more. But here am I with a frustrated reward for a shave, what you might call an unrequited shave. How serious you are, Suzanne! What 's that you 're reading?'

'I 'm reading *Phèdre*.'

'Racine's *Phèdre*? Don't you know *Phèdre*?'

'I know this play by heart, monsieur?'

'Then why are you reading it?'

'You're a simpleton. I'm not reading it: I'm acting it that way, in my innermost heart.'

'Have you ever played Phèdre? I mean, the part of Phèdre?'

'Well, no, unfortunately. I've only played Aricie.'

Hubert stopped, pulled his spectacles out of their case, planted them on his nose with one of those gestures, at once graceful and a little bit mad, which were so natural to him, and then gazed at Suzanne.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' inquired the girl 'Isn't it rather impertinent?'

'Oh! you were obviously made to be looked at, Suzanne. And any one who didn't look at you would be committing a mortal sin. But don't you think, Suzanne, to play Phèdre, I mean the part of Phèdre, you must . . . you must have . . .'

'Out with it, you crazy moralist.'

'It's a case of "Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée"'

'Yes, well, and what then?'

Hubert gave a little snigger and for the moment made no reply. Putting his arm round Suzanne's waist with that freedom which was characteristic of all his attitudes and gestures, he drew the girl towards the far end of the garden.

A warm morning mist was rising from the valley. The earth, smitten by the May sunshine, exhaled such sweet rich scents that the young man exclaimed in a low voice:

'I'm like the beasts of the forest. I believe I could find my way through life by my sense of smell. Oh, thyme! Oh, savory! Oh, burnet! Balm, Suzanne, balm! And that! You don't know what that is, you town-dweller! It's like a warning hint of the autumn in the very heart of spring. . . . It's the tiny golden chrysanthemums growing over there in that corner.'

Then without any transition he said, almost in an undertone:

'I was going to suggest to you a sort of secret treaty, demoiselle who loves nobody. Because it must be clearly understood that you love nobody.'

'It's true, I love nobody, because I love everybody. I even had some idea of joining the Club of the Indifferents.'

'You shall be made an honorary member, O lovelest of Suzannes.'

'And what is this secret treaty?'

Hubert stopped, tried to frown heavily, pursed his lips, which were full and round like a child's, in a comical grimace, and said with the greatest seriousness:

'You must understand, Suzanne dear, that I am probably the only one here who is not in love with you. That deserves some consideration. I am probably the only person in the world not in love with you, for I too am not in love with anybody. Now on account of that you ought to have a sort of admiration for me. On account of that you might even have for me a sort of love. Is that clear?'

'Oh, crystal clear,' replied Suzanne in the same tone. 'But I don't see the treaty.'

'Wait, Suzanouchka! I'm coming to it. We're getting to it. You have nothing whatever to fear from me, demoiselle chosen of all the others. So you are to behave as if you had a weakness, a fondness, a fancy for me.'

'Yes, I see. And what next?'

'Next, we'll watch the effect of this experimental manoeuvre on the others. . . Now is that a bargain for the treaty?'

'You're asking me to play a part. The parts I play are always given to me in writing.'

'You don't really want me to give it to you in writing?'

Suzanne cast an amused glance at the boy. Then she half closed her eyes, drew back a step, and sighed:

'Charmant, jeune, trainant tous les cœurs après soi . . .

'No,' she said a little later, 'don't write anything. We'll make it up as we go along.'

XIII

A GLORIOUS spring floods the sweet valley of the Sauseron. Daily the conquering light treads on the cloak of night and laughingly chases it to the frontier of its empire. Daily the festival is prolonged and the interval of darkness is curtailed,

barely cooled off, between the final glimmer and the first blaze. Everything declares that nature is marching on, and yet, for Suzanne, time seems to be standing still, as though under a spell. How many years has she been on this hill-top at Nesles, in this house of singers, dreamers, and madmen? She would find it difficult to say. It seems to her sometimes as if she had only arrived the day before, led by Philippe, in the light of the great blue planet. At other moments she has a vague feeling of having been in this magic house since the beginning of eternity.

Suzanne would like to prolong this delicious torpor, so like a sleep. She can feel rising in her, as yesterday, and as always, that wave of tender devotion, of stammered longing, of silent pleading, that murmur, that whisper of adoration without which life would be unlivable when one is Suzanne. So let time wait, and away with all thoughts of regret! Then, too, can one tell how one occupies a day so filled with sunlight, sweet scents, and happy songs? Pleasures that never cloy, little occupations that never become burdens, a wonderful freedom from care, a sober cheerfulness; Suzanne can open her eyes and ears, she meets with nothing else on this sunny hill-top.

Sometimes she recalls, though somewhat furtively, what life was like in the past, in the Pasquier family circle. Certainly there was Cécile, the goddess of music, and Laurent, the learned brother wrestling with illusions, and the old mother transfixed with a thousand secret sorrows, and the father, like some magnificent self-willed actor who plays his own life as the only part he cares for, and Joseph, let loose on the universe like a buffalo on the prairie, and Ferdinand, yes, Ferdinand, about whom there's perhaps nothing to say. . . But Suzanne has always lived in the maternal home like a tropic bird in a northern aviary. She has a vague recollection of a life of drudgery, combats, constant quarrels, dramatic scenes. She turned away almost from the first from all those tumults of the clan: too much shouting, too much counting of pence, too many squabbles. . . . Suzanne flew away as soon as the cage

door was open. She is not a hot-house Pasquier like the others.

She won't even ask herself how long the whim which brought her here will hold her in this house on the hill. She is comfortable here. She grows torpid in the sunlight and warmth, like that white cat dozing on the window-ledge under the burning sky. Were not all the people of this house created for Suzanne's pleasure and entertainment? She gazes with a sort of placid fondness at Philippe, who, if he held a fiery sword in his hand, would look uncommonly like an archangel. She feels quite a thrill of affection when she sees the lanky Marc, so bashful and so full of blushes, and who, chisel and mallet in hand, makes one think of a young god of the ancient myths. There is a fund of amusement here for her in listening to the lisping prattle of Hubert of the flying locks and playing a perpetual comedy with him. All the other Baudoins please her fancy like the characters in some lovely, legendary story. She has taken her place amongst them, quite simply, from the very first. She sings, at noon and in the evening, in the midst of the choir, just behind the blind man. She is not very well up in musical matters, but after all she is Cécile's sister and finds her way fairly easily in the forest of harmonies. She picks flowers in the garden, arranging them in delicate bouquets which everybody praises extravagantly, for she has only to lift a finger, say a word, make a gesture, and the entire Baudoin family choruses its admiration. Occasionally she pins on a dainty apron and learns from Mme Baudoin how to make a blancmange, a *quatre-quarts*, or a fritter.

In the evening, when the sky is clear and darkness is still far off, Thérèse pulls off her socks and dances barefooted on the lawn in front of the house. It is not one of the dances one learns at school. Thérèse just obeys the inspiration of her young heart, and from time to time, by favour of heaven, she finds a new gesture, one of those gestures that men have probably made thousands and thousands of times but have never seen before. Suzanne claps her hands. She too would like to dance. She dances and delights in it.

When the whole family gathers together and marches through the garden, beating saucepans, cauldrons, and warming-pans to guide a swarm of bees towards a deserted hive, Suzanne seizes a copper pot and takes her part in this savage orchestra. For the first time in her life she has put her little feet into wooden sabots, and she dexterously loops up her skirt between her knees and holds a watering can at arm's length and waters the young plants, thirsty after a day of sunshine. Suzanne sometimes feels she is living, not on the hill at Nesles, but amidst the shepherds and shepherdesses of a certain piece of Jouy tapestry which she used to admire not long ago every morning when she woke up. On Fridays and Tuesdays, with Mme Baudoin and Madeleine, she climbs into the cart harnessed to a donkey with a nice grey velvety nose. In this vehicle she goes off to the market at L'Isle-Adam. She enjoys strolling under the canopy of leaves, among the noble trees, gazing at heaps of vegetables, cheeses, fruits, and meat, and all the gifts of the bountiful earth.

In the evening, in the family circle, Suzanne listens with tranquil enjoyment to little Catherine, who in a shrill, true voice sings *L'Amour de moi* and the *Complainte de Renaud*. Occasionally somebody brings Suzanne a book of poetry or a play. She opens it and reads aloud. All by herself she acts a whole scene. Familiar shades seem to step out of the walls and mingle under the lamplight with the creatures of flesh and blood.

It may happen that a mantle of silence falls for a whole minute on the souls gathered there. Then one can hear the singing of a kettle almost on the boil in the adjoining kitchen. One can hear the demons of the night rattling a shutter against its bolts. One can hear a patient insect at work in the heart of a beam in the thickness of the flooring. Then Jérôme Baudoin says suddenly with quiet contentment:

'Only yesterday life was despised, humiliated, and sacrificed; possibly that is why it is so precious, so dear to me, why it seems so delightful to me to-day. . . .'

Jérôme Baudoin's voice is calm and even. It spreads on

the air without seeming to break the spell of silence. Then he adds, as though in a dream he were answering the unspoken thoughts of others:

'The world may fancy that it can live and do without us, without people like us: but I'm sure it's mistaken. If the world rejects us we shall not be the only ones to suffer. And if the world accepts us it will one day understand that we have a mission, that of preserving something precious, of which we are secretly the artificers, the guardians.'

Once more silence reigns. Then the youngest of the children stretches its limbs with a sigh. Mme Baudoin drops her knitting into her basket and claps her hands to awaken the sleepest of the party.

Sometimes Hubert gets restive. He rises, fidgets with his arms and legs, lets out a few strange sounds, and begins to give vent to his feelings. He says: 'I'm miserable to-day, I feel as if I were outside myself' Or else: 'I can see my nose. Ever since this morning I can't help seeing the tip of my nose, and it embarrasses me.' Or again: 'I came across a cockchafer and he was so lonely and depressed. We wept together.'

Sometimes Hubert questions Suzanne:

'Tell me, beloved soul, if we were to wake up amongst the dead, in a thousand years' time, what would you most wish to hear to remind you of life?'

Suzanne, taken aback, shrugs her shoulders without replying; but the children, well accustomed to their brother's vagaries, call out quickly:

'Me, the thrush at the Valards.'

'Me, the noise of the wind in the poplars!'

'Me, the whistle of the trains on rainy days in the valley of the Oise!'

'But in a thousand years' time there won't be any more trains. People won't even know what is meant by a train.'

'Suzanne,' the madcap boy goes on, 'do you know why the thrush, who sings so well, is of small account compared with the nightingale?'

'Hubert,' scolds Philippe, 'don't keep worrying Suzanne.'

'I assure you he's not worrying me in the least,' answers Suzanne. 'He's only making me aware of my ignorance.'

'Because,' goes on Hubert, with his hands in his pockets, and emphasizing his words with movements of his head, 'because the thrush learns one little tune at the beginning of the season and then repeats it thousands of times. Whereas the nightingale is like me, mademoiselle, he never knows what he may say the next minute. He is obliged to keep on inventing. Oh, my children! The old apple-tree is dying. That's why I'm ready to weep. Would it be irreverent to say the prayers for the dying over a tree at its last gasp? For my part, when one of our trees dies, I feel like going into deep mourning.'

'Hubert,' grumbles Philippe, 'you're tiring Suzanne out.'

But Suzanne shakes her head:

'Come, Philippe, don't look so dismal. Your brother's not tiring me, he's really very entertaining.'

'You know he's crazy.'

'I've no objection to that sort of craziness.'

At that Philippe turns his head away. Suddenly he looks very sad. He would like to hide it, but doesn't succeed very well.

XIV

THIS miraculous peace was chequered with small events

One day a sumptuous car of American make might have been seen to stop at the Cavée des Portes. Through the wind-screen one caught a glimpse of a man in livery with gilt buttons, but the wheel was in the gloved hands of a man with greying hair and muscular shoulders. He set foot to the ground and then drew himself up with a sort of groan. He had a heavy jaw, a thick nose, a small toothbrush moustache, and cheeks that were not exactly flabby but reminded one of frozen meat. He wore a saffron-yellow tweed suit, honey-coloured shoes with crêpe soles, and a valuable ring on the forefinger of his left hand. He did not attempt to conceal the fact that he was a commander of the national order. Bare-headed in the strong

sunlight, he took a few steps, eyed the Baudoins' house from left to right and from top to bottom, and then went and rang at the gate. He waited impatiently, and realizing at last that there was no gate-keeper and that one could walk in, he lifted the latch and pushed the gate open. At that moment, as the dogs began to bark, Mme Baudoin appeared on the steps of the porch.

The visitor gave his name, Joseph Pasquier. He had called to see his sister, who, he had heard quite by chance, was at Nesles, quite close to his estate.

He spoke with the polite insolence of those people who, by their choice of words, by their intonations, and by every movement imply that they are wasting their time, but that unfortunately they have not a single minute to spare. Antoinette Baudoin gazed at him with such a quiet yet dignified smile that little by little Joseph softened and finally relaxed his aggressive shoulders to their normal level. A brief conversation followed, during which Joseph eyed the lady of the house with that sort of surly suspicion that he always felt towards persons of a certain rank. But this embarrassment was dispelled when Suzanne, fetched by one of the children, appeared at the door. That morning, as it happened, she had put on a panniered frock of a borage blue which delicately brought out the periwinkle blue of her eyes, one of those sweetly extravagant garments that were always to be found in the Bluebeard chamber and that with a dozen pins and a few stitches a person of any taste could fix up to her own size and fancy.

Joseph gazed at Suzanne in some astonishment. He had come to scold, but he didn't dare. He shrugged his shoulders and said

'In fancy dress so early in the morning?'

'No,' replied Suzanne calmly, 'this isn't fancy dress, it's my frock for to-day.'

Joseph eyed her furtively, chewing the end of his glove, then turning towards Mme Baudoin he said:

'If you will allow me, madame, as it's a fine morning, we'll go into the garden. No, no, please don't trouble, madame.'

He bowed, took his sister by the arm, and did not even wait to get away from the house before he started on the reprimand which he seemed to keep in readiness in his pro-consular chin.

'What on earth are you doing here? . . . Really, this is absurd. What's the meaning of this escapade? It's being talked about in Paris. But it won't be talked about for ever. If you appear to be forgetting your career, your career will forget you. . . . In the theatre world people are ungrateful, as they are in business or anywhere else.'

He was speaking in a low tone, but gradually, as they drew away from the house, he raised his voice, interrupting his speech with mighty 'h'ms' as rough as blows of a mallet, the 'h'ms' of a gentleman who smokes too many cigars. He didn't even give Suzanne time to improvise a defence; all at once he began afresh to rate her, as he had always done from their young days. He was her elder by almost twenty years and fully intended to go on treating her like a little girl.

'I don't want to say anything against these people. But come, is there any sense in coming and planting yourself amongst these artists whom every one looks upon as rather crazy? Are you even decently comfortable? Have you got running water? I can bet you haven't. And central heating for the evenings when it's chilly? Peuh! It's just a shack. You'll tell me they're decent people . . .'

'No, no,' Suzanne broke in, flushing angrily, 'I shan't tell you anything.'

'If only,' he went on, 'you'd done me the honour of coming down to stay with me at La Châtaigneraie on the other side of the village, it's not merely a bedroom I should have been pleased to offer you but a complete suite, with a maid entirely at your service. That is what would have been suitable for the sister of M. Joseph Pasquier. You ought not to forget, Suzanne, that you are the sister of M. Joseph Pasquier.'

As always during interviews with her elder brother, Suzanne forgot her anger and began to laugh heartily, a real stage laugh, crystal clear and musical.

'Are you sure that you yourself don't forget that you are the brother of Cécile, of Laurent, and of Suzanne?'

Remarks of that kind exasperated Joseph. And Suzanne's laugh could also make him grind his teeth.

'My poor Joseph,' she went on, 'I'm not asking anything of you. So why do you want to find fault with me? I don't try to discover what you do with your time or your money.'

Joseph started to cough, seized the girl by the wrist, and began to speak in low tones, although at that moment they were quite a distance from the house

'H'm! h'm!' he went, as he peered suspiciously at Suzanne. 'Of course, if you go and read what those idiots in the *Impartial* are writing just now, if you read all that rot about the Central Oil Corporation . . .'

'Oh!' murmured Suzanne, 'how can I make you understand, Joseph, that I don't read the papers and I've never even seen this paper you're talking about?'

Joseph pointed a finger at a bee, and his face relaxed into a sort of smile

'Every one,' he said, 'thinks it natural to make bees work. And when they have worked well every one thinks it natural to plunder their reserves. And nobody comes along protesting in the name of charity and justice and all that. Every one looks upon it as quite natural to fatten geese, rabbits, sheep, and other animals. And when they are well fattened, we take their reserves and, of course, at the same time their lives. That's how man behaves. And, what's more, he's an awful hypocrite! As for me, I take their money from men who don't deserve it or at any rate are incapable of keeping it. And with that money I start enterprises which give work to whole populations. I content myself with taking money. I am better than those who take everything, even life itself, with the excuse that geese and sheep are not of our kind. As a matter of fact, a Japanese or a Colombian, is he really of my kind?'

A sort of sacred fury would fill Joseph at such moments. His hair would rise. Suddenly he would seem to be twice his

normal size, like certain animals when preparing for battle. He said further:

'They talk a lot about Communism. Well, let it come, this Communism. I'll take on their Communism. I'd like to see what would prevent me from making money, me, M Joseph Pasquier!'

And then all of a sudden Suzanne could suppose that the crisis had passed. Joseph began to smile again, puffed out his cheeks, sampled the air in little sniffs, and, adopting a sentimental tone, said:

'Now you, my little Suzanne, have always been terribly egotistical. And so you don't even ask me how they are getting on. . . .'

'Whom do you mean?'

'The others: father, mother, all the family. You ought to go and see them.'

'I wrote to them a few days ago, at least to mother.'

'I'm a little worried about father. He's getting thin. He's running off the rails. He scribbles all day long. He sends letters to . . . what's his name? . . . Bergson? Yes, Bergson, that's it, and the funny part of it is that Bergson replies, and quite politely. Father now fancies himself one of the foremost philosophers of modern times. And perhaps he's right. After all, why not? You won't always find the same ones in the same places. Philosophers, well, one knows what they are, one knows what they're worth a yard. Come, I'm off, now I've seen you. Hélène had thought of calling on you, as you aren't coming to the château. But Hélène's up to her eyes in work. And then, too, she's rather hurt. She thinks you don't want to see her. It seems she passed you one day in the car, and you were perched in a donkey-cart. Think of it—a donkey-cart! Ah! Here's M. Baudoin. One would never suppose he was blind. But one never knows. There's no means of verifying. As for me, I'm always on my guard.'

He went on grumbling up to the moment when they reached the gate, where Jérôme Baudoin was standing. Joseph said a

few words which he regarded as most gracious and friendly, though to Suzanne they seemed horribly tactless. As Joseph was taking his leave Jérôme Baudoin murmured.

‘You have a very fine car, Monsieur Pasquier!’

Joseph stopped dead and cast a look of suspicion at him, almost fearful of this blind man who could speak so positively of visible objects. No doubt M. Baudoin felt this surprise, for he added:

‘Oh, I can’t actually see it, but I can hear it running, and then, too, I can feel that you yourself regard it with admiration and respect.’

No one could have said that this brief remark had entirely appeased Joseph. He snorted, muttered something unintelligible which doubtless was meant as a formula of farewell, climbed into his car, and slammed the door. Then he disappeared, in the act of startling the landscape with a terrific blast of the klaxon.

Behind this blast the silence of the hill-top closed up again, like a sheet of calm water. Peace fell once more on the Cavée des Portes and the life of Suzanne. When she thought of her brother, she conjured up one of those fabulous beings who people the other planets.

A few days later she received a letter from Paris. It was Philippe who every morning took the mail out of the box and handed it out to the members of the household. He held the letter between his fingers, an unhappy look on his face, this letter looked like other letters no doubt, but the sight of it filled him with anxiety, he hardly knew why. Suzanne opened the envelope, read the letter, and fell into a brown study. From time to time she emerged from it and stared about her in surprise. At other moments her lips moved, and in an undertone, with a far-away look, she murmured words that Philippe could not understand:

‘Oh, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o’er me
No, sir, you must not kneel . . .’

A moment later she seemed to notice Philippe, gave him a

friendly smile, and started a vague conversation which she dropped almost at once. Two or three days went by, and once again Suzanne seemed to be conquered by the quiet harmony of the hill-top. Hour by hour, Philippe took heart again.

One night Hubert did not come back to the Cavée des Portes. Quite often he spent the whole day in Paris, for his studies, and as it was difficult for him to get back to Nesles in the late evening, he slept the night in an apartment almost stripped of furniture which the Baudoins still owned on Sainte-Geneviève and which served the whole family as a *pied-à-terre* and a refuge. Hubert only got back the next day in the middle of the afternoon. Suzanne was in the garden, posing; once again Philippe was doing a portrait of her. With sudden changes of voice, asides, parentheses, and those wild digressions which usually exasperated Philippe and made Suzanne laugh, Hubert began to give them an account of his day in Paris. He had been to the theatre, and what was more, to the Théâtre des Carmes, 'just to see what the Greeks were up to in their wretched peninsula, now that Helen had been taken from them; for such was the situation, Helen was at Troy, Île-de-France, at the court of Priam. . . .'

That was how Hubert talked, with his lisp and his bursts of lyricism. Suzanne listened to him, her face suddenly stiff, almost anxious. She was on the point of questioning him. She was burning to question him. She refrained, out of obstinacy, or pride, possibly. In any case questions were unnecessary. Hubert supplied the answers in advance. At Les Carmes, he said, they were giving *King Lear*, Eric Vidame himself was playing the aged monarch. It wasn't bad, but a bit thin, a little too . . . you know . . . artificial . . . and the part of Cordelia, oh, the part of Cordelia! Cordelia was simply indescribable! A good lady who ate stewed cat and who in the pathetic scenes went through the action of polishing the nails of one hand against the palm of the other . . . a sort of fortune-teller plus wardrobe dealer. And to cap it all, a terrific foreign accent.

Philippe, with brows puckered in a heavy frown, couldn't conceal his irritation.

'I'm working,' he shouted angrily. 'Can't you see I'm working?'

It was usually enough to say something of the kind to Hubert for him to lose all desire to take himself off. But that day he felt that he had been tactless, even indiscreet, and that if one wished to keep Helen happy in Asia it would be better not to remind her of Sparta. He began to stammer, and retired.

Philippe went on painting, but he had lost control of himself. He trembled, and the palette on his wrist amplified the trembling. At last Suzanne said:

"Will 't please your highness to walk?"

'What's that you're asking me?' stammered Philippe.

'Forgive me, it's really Cordelia speaking.'

Philippe shook his head thoughtfully.

'Ah!' he sighed for the hundredth time, 'how you do love the theatre!'

Suzanne quitted her pose, went up to the young man, took the palette carefully from his hand, and laid it on the grass as she said:

'And how you do love painting, monseigneur!'

'Yes, yes,' said he, 'but . . .'

'But what?'

'I adore painting; but painting is not what I love best in life.'

There was a long silence and Suzanne murmured:

'How hot it is!'

A little later on she said very clearly:

'Can you find it strange and absurd that I should love the thing to which I have given my life?'

She stopped for a flash of time, and then went on: '. . . to which I have given my life . . . up to now. . . .'

Philippe gave her a look heavy with anguish. Then, as if she were following the thread of an obscure, unformulated thought, she said in a low voice:

'Where and what is life, my poor Philippe? There are

days when I really can't say. Try to understand, Philippe, when the day breaks, if I happen to be up, I'm perished, I'm cold, I feel ill at ease, and that's all, yes, all. But if I read in Claudel, "The day breaks," that simplest of phrases, well, I'm caught up in an extraordinary onrush of poetry and the world seems to me marvellous. There, Philippe, that's what I can't explain, what I don't even try to explain. It's just how I happen to be.'

The young man seized Suzanne's hand, eagerly yet shyly. It was evident that he was seeking words to relieve his anxiety. But no words came.

'Are you happy here?' he sighed. 'Tell me that you are happy here.'

Then, without waiting for an answer and because he seemed to dread the possibility of an answer, he went on:

'You'll never go away! Isn't that so, Suzanne, you'll never go away?'

Suzanne then made one of those gestures that women employ and that give a natural answer to all questions, even the most extraordinary: she put her hand on Philippe's head. With the forefinger of that hand she lifted the curly locks and gently pushed them back from the fine white brow. And Philippe began to smile, in an ecstasy of hope.

All the evening Suzanne played the part of Cordelia in snatches of dialogue and attitudes. Then calm returned once more to the hill-top and Philippe dreamt that he was going to build a Chinese wall to enclose his captive. It would make a wide sweep through the woods of La Tour-du-Laye, run along Hédouville, climb back on to the plateau, descend again to La Naze . . . He traced thus generously the outline of his domain so that his captive shouldn't be even aware of its boundaries and therefore would have no desire to cross them.

A few more days went by. Suzanne used to get up somewhat later than the household. It was a habit of an actress accustomed to long and tiring evenings. But one morning, awakened by the heat, she got up, dressed early, and went into the corridor. She went along softly without making a sound.

A window was open and Suzanne paused at it. She was about to gaze at the sky, the clouds, the curling greenery under the first rays of sunshine: but she heard coming from below something like a cry, and, very soon, a sob. Cautiously she looked down.

Mme Baudoin was sitting in an old wicker arm-chair in the empty courtyard near the door. A young girl was kneeling before her, weeping into her bent arm. Suzanne recognized Paule Châtel, the little cousin with the beautiful misty eyes, the one who every day polished Hubert's shoes with the air of a devoted Cinderella. Over her shoulders she had a little Moldavian shawl with a lovely bronze sheen. She was weeping like a child whose nose is swollen with tears, and who is probably squinting under the influence of her distress. Mme Baudoin was patting her shoulders with a maternal, distressful gesture. Suddenly the girl said:

'Aunt, aunt, you know that he never even looks at me now.'

Suzanne had the feeling that she had caught a glimpse into an abyss such as may open beneath our feet in the workaday world, but of which she supposed the magic hill-top would be miraculously free. She drew back and hastily returned to her room. She was stirred, disquieted, and herself on the verge of tears.

The day was hot and sultry. The wind came from the south in burning gusts. Men were at work in the kitchen, and the blows of their hammers shook the walls. Towards the end of the afternoon a great sooty cloud appeared on the brow of the hill and rose into the sky. Mme Baudoin went to the centre of the courtyard and called out towards the house:

'Children, shut all the windows! Here comes the storm.'

This was none of those storms which can rage in the depths of a heart and not be seen, or that one can feign not to see or even scorn to see. It was a real storm in the sky, with fuliginous vapours, pitch-black clouds, deluges of biblical intensity, wild squalls, and the boom of heavy artillery.

From here and there could be heard the rattle of casement latches and the slamming of shutters. The house was shutting

itself up at the approach of the monster. The trees in the little shrubbery, suddenly seized with terror, uttered a long-drawn wail. A cold breath, come from who knows where, passed like a shudder across the face of nature. The darkness grew so thick that it was impossible to read or work, and the family were soon congregated in the common room. Then a streak of forked lightning ripped the sky and the waters came pouring vertically down from the heavens in great sheets. Hubert rushed in, his hair plastered down with rain. He said: 'I've been to put the frames over the seedlings.'

Then he sat down in a corner. Every one seemed upset. A child asked:

'Ought we to light a lamp? It's like real night.'

Mme Baudoin refused to light a lamp, and for some minutes each soul communed with itself in the sulphurous darkness. Outside, the rain fell as in the best days of the deluge and the storm broadened its sinister shadow over the house on the hill-top.

Philippe was the first to break the silence into which they had all fallen. He exclaimed:

'We ought to act a play, Suzanne. It won't rain for ever. We'll play it for ourselves without any audience, in the garden, on the terrace, in the wood, or wherever we choose. Oh, of course, I don't know much about it, but I don't think we ought to play anything solemn or tragic. Better have a fantasy, a fairy play, a *divertissement*, with plenty of lovers and lots of dressing up. Wait and I'll show you the costume I'm going to have. For you will give me a part, won't you, Suzanne? I'll be very obedient and I'll rehearse as often as you like.'

He disappeared for a few minutes and then returned, draped in a crimson tunic. He had a gold mask, sandals, a cithara, a crown of leaves. He began to sing in a pleasant, tuneful voice:

'Quand l'amour à vos yeux offre un choix agréable,
Jeunes beautés, laissez-vous enflammer
Moquez-vous d'affecter cet orgueil indomptable
Dont on vous dit qu'il est beau de s'armer'

Suddenly there appeared through the rain-drenched windows a large patch of blue sky. The storm was making off

in a smoky huddle towards the wooded hills. The entire party rushed into the garden. Suzanne was filled with enthusiasm. She and Philippe began to sketch out a marvellous *mise en scène* between the terrace steps, the lawns, and the copse where the last shower had left hanging millions of dewy pearls and sparkling emeralds.

XV

THE selection of the play to be put on did not proceed without some squabbling. Every one had preferences, memories, a pet character, a tender regard for some ghostly figure, some favourite lines slumbering in his bosom and ready to come to life again. Jérôme Baudoin was all for *La Princesse d'Elide*, because, he said, it was not so much a play as a sketch, a half-finished piece of work, which one would have fewer scruples in adapting to the taste of the Baudoins, treating it like one of the skeleton plots of the *commedia dell' arte*. It bore a fairy-like sub-title, *Les Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*, and there were parts for every one, songs, dances, music—in short, every kind of entertainment.

Suzanne was considering the matter of casting, naturally, but she had thousands of things to see to, and suddenly found herself frightfully rushed. Up to now in this house on the hill-top she had been merely an idle visitor, a petted stranger, Balkis at the court of Solomon. Now she was once more in the front rank, her natural place. She overflowed visibly with life, fire, and enjoyment.

At first it had been hoped that there would be enough parts to go all round. When at last Jérôme got his way and the Molière play was settled upon, they saw that there were more than enough parts, for to make the play come alive they would need princes, attendants, a tutor, shepherds and shepherdesses, satyrs, huntsmen, kennelmen, and Aurora. The Baudoins called in their cousins to the rescue, the Bellefonds of L'Isle-Adam and the Gerfauds of Butry. They were good-looking

young people, each of whom, whether boy or girl, showed some strange, striking likeness to a Baudoin: a turn of the head, a curve of the back, a build of the forehead, a clearness of the complexion. As soon as they were at leisure they came along on their bicycles. They slid smoothly into the Baudoin world. They knew the tribal passwords, they never made a mistake over rallying-cries or secret formulas. Nearly all of them could sing in a chorus, or dance, or play some instrument of music. All of them knew the hidden haunts of the clan, the twists and turns of the corridors, and the dark spaces of the attics. All of them could make their way across the garden in the dark without treading on a strawberry or bruising a daisy. They went by instinct to the right place to find a nail, a pair of pliers, or the brace and bit in the lumber shed. They were on familiar terms with the dog, the cat, the donkey, the ducks, and the wood-lice. They rummaged with dexterous hands among the jumble of Bluebeard's chamber and produced precious specimens whose pedigree they could trace and even recount their various transformations. They said 'we,' like the Baudoins, with the same tranquil pride. If they arrived after dark and the weather was bad, they were put up for the night, so as to be able to go on with the work, or finish a talk, or settle an argument. In every room there were beds, divans, or sofas, and sleepers in all the beds, and guests at all the tables. They hauled each other from room to room; they gave each other cues through ceilings and walls. They woke in the morning to the sound of flutes, like Michel de Montaigne of old.

Thérèse had searched the Paris libraries, in order to find and copy Lully's music, and every evening Jérôme Baudoin assembled his fiddlers and singers and rehearsed them sedulously. They unearthed three old hunting-horns from the bottom of a dusty cupboard, and the boys went off to the woods at the close of day to blow them in the open air.

Mme Baudoin, Thérèse, and the young girls, all other cares set aside, were hard at work, ingeniously contriving new costumes out of old stuffs, laces, ribbons, and many-coloured rags. All day long the sewing machine hummed. Marc,

drunk with mute enthusiasm, was busy making hempen beards, tow wigs, and papier-mâché masks.

The play having been read aloud to a full meeting, it was now the moment to give each his part. It was easy enough to find an Iphitos or an Arbate, a Lycas or a Tircis. But all the young men, as they gazed at the Princess of Elis, secretly hoped to be Euryale, the favoured lover. In despair they finally decided to draw lots for the part, and it was Hubert who won. He cut a caper, put his arm round the princess, and whispered in her ear:

'All the same, Suzon, it's too bad that we aren't really in love. We ought to be, we two, if there were any justice and logic in the world. What do you say, Suzon? Shall we have a try, Suzon?'

As he tried to whirl her off into a stormy waltz, the princess first of all rapped his knuckles and then went on to admonish him:

'You'll have to learn to pronounce your *s*'s correctly.'

'But,' he expostulated in surprise, 'I pronounce my *s*'s quite well.'

Suzanne burst out laughing.

'What marvellous self-assurance! If you want to play Euryale you'll have to leave off talking like a little boy.'

'I never guessed that I didn't pronounce my *s*'s properly. Well, then, you shall give me some lessons. And after that, teach me how to make up.'

She gave him a fleeting look of amusement tinged with tenderness. With her finger she drew imaginary lines on his face.

'Always this fuss about making up,' she said, 'as if the art of the actor was merely a question of paint. In any case, we're going to play in full daylight. Yes, I'll give you some lessons. You won't need much: just a little stroke of blue here, at the tail end of your eyebrow, and there in the corner near your nose a little dab of red, to give brightness to your eye. And I'm sure that we can find in Bluebeard's chamber a nice piece of gold braid with which to persuade your hair to keep quiet.'

'That,' said Hubert, 'is the most difficult thing in the world. Look out, madame! Unless I'm much mistaken, Marc and Philippe are going to have a fit, they're so jealous.'

'Jealous,' exclaimed the princess. 'Aren't you vain! Who has given you the right to make any one jealous? What has come over you?'

'What has come over me, dear lady? A tremendous desire to kiss you. A desire I'm not so sure I shall be able to resist.'

'Don't forget, little boy, that I'm bristling with pins.'

'Pooh! They're not jealous of Hubert, it's Euryale they're jealous of. Ah, well, I can see that there's no help for it and that I'm going to kiss you.'

'There's no kissing in this play. Behave! It's time we began rehearsing.'

Philippe had not unwillingly consented to play the Prince of Messene. There was only one thing that he cared about and that was that Suzanne should be happy on the hill-top. And happy she was in good truth—excited over all sorts of tasks, flushed with pleasure, eagerly talkative. She ran from one floor to the other, from the lawns to the terrace, from the studio to the garden. To one she would indicate an attitude, to another the intonation of a phrase. Ten times in an hour she would go upstairs to the amateur sempstresses and correct the fall of a tunic, re-drape a peplum, adjust a petasus, lace up a sandal, and discuss at length various devices for the stage setting. What in Nesles was called the green weather was over. The sky was clear and transparent. A hot sun poured its rays on all this youthful joyousness. The impromptu players had got into the habit of strolling about in their flimsy Greek costumes, most of which were of a fantastic oddity. They went off in couples to rehearse in the garden. And so it happened that one day in the middle of the afternoon, the Princess of Elis and Prince Aristomène, dreaming, reciting, conversing, walked as far as the high meadow on whose skirts were planted those votive saplings of which M. Baudoin used to say: 'They will be our forest.'

'Don't think, Suzanne dear,' said Philippe, 'that I'm really

disappointed at not playing Euryale. I am no Euryale. I am not and can never be any good as an actor. This passion and fire, these metaphors, all this manner of speaking . . .'

'It's merely a dream language.'

'I hardly dare to confess that it doesn't move me. What I feel is more simple, direct, and strong. Wait a moment, Suzanne darling.'

He began to pace the meadow with long, limping strides as though he were taking a mental measure of the land. Suzanne tried to keep up with him. He looked preoccupied; at last he said:

'If I were to speak of love, if I could speak of love, that's not how I should wish to speak of it.'

'And what is there to prevent you too, my lord, from speaking of love?'

'Can one speak of love to one who doesn't love?'

'Ah,' she said, reciting from her part in sing-song tones, "'that is no reason, my lord, and, without wishing to love, one is always well pleased to be loved.'"

He had stopped counting his paces in the grass. He gazed closely at her, his eyes proud and bright, and that gaze seemed to say: 'You see, Suzanne, I am calm and controlled and have no intention of plaguing you. I am not speaking to you of love. But look at me, look at all of us, I beg of you, and tell me if this life that we live here could ever appeal to you.'

She turned aside as though to get away, to escape from that look. Once more changing the subject, she murmured:

'What are you looking for just here? Why do you take such long steps and go on counting to yourself?'

'I am taking measurements, Suzanne.'

'Measurements of what, monseigneur?'

'Measurements of this ground which belongs to us. One could build a house on this high meadow. I've consulted the architects: water could easily be brought up here. Look, Suzanne dear. Would this view please you? You can see the whole of the narrow valley, with its woods, its gardens, its fields and pastures. You can see the Hérrouville plateau, with

the roads slipping away to the fair and happy provinces. You can even see the shadow of a cloud passing slowly by like a sad thought. Don't you think, Suzanne, that one could build a fine house on this spot, and live a fine life?"

Suzanne dropped her head and remained thoughtful. Then, reassuming the voice of the Princess of Elis, she murmured:

"My lord, I don't yet know what I want. Give me time to think about it, I beg you, and spare me the embarrassment in which I find myself."

"I thought," continued the young man, "that if you were ever, some day, to have for me some liking, some affection—you see, I'm steering clear of rash expressions—I thought that you ought to see me as I am and not merely in a street in Paris, or in the dark passages of the theatre, your theatre. I thought that, in order to judge me and understand me, you ought to see me here, on this land where I have lived, where I have grown up, where I love to work, to see me here, among my own people, among us."

"Ah," exclaimed the girl, "when you people say "us" like that, do you know, monseigneur, you thoroughly scare me?"

"Not really!" he said, laughing whole-heartedly. "Oh, but I quite understand your surprise. When we speak of "us" or "us others," we are affirming something that is our creed of life. Do you know, Suzanne, that we have every one of us a little brown mark at the base of the neck? Other people might perhaps be ashamed of it. We are very proud of it, and we call it our family mark. It's a sort of supernatural distinction."

"I can well imagine," said the princess, "that you could never deign to fall in love with an unfortunate person who had not been favoured with this miraculous mark."

He shook his head, refusing to be turned aside.

"I'll tell you something more. Outside our own family, outside our own circle, I don't believe we could love anything or any one completely except you, just you, Suzanne darling."

She raised her eyebrows swiftly and whispered, sure of her technique, all laughter and coquetry:

"What an honour, my dear prince!"

Then, curtsying low, she proceeded to declaim a further snatch of her part.

"The gods are not as the common herd, and it is a lack of respect to attribute to them the weaknesses of men."

At this Philippe stood silent and disconcerted, convinced that he had gone too far, and that once again his clumsiness had marred and lost the precious moment of solitude.

At that moment they saw approaching, with their crooks and their panniers, a group of shepherds and shepherdesses who were dancing and singing in chorus:

*'Un cœur ne commence à vivre
Que du jour qu'il sait aimer'*

'One day I shall have to put a question to you,' said the young man, 'a single question, Suzanne darling. And that day you won't be able to avoid giving me an answer.'

She set her eyelids fluttering, as she always did when she found herself caught out, and turning away her head she said:

'Wait a little while longer, I beg of you. Aren't we very well as we are, monseigneur?'

She could not add anything further. The shepherds, dancing in a ring, surrounded them and drew them along in the direction of the house.

Thus escorted, the princess made her way down to the terrace. Rehearsal was resumed. It dragged somewhat. The players seemed absent-minded. And when little Paule Chastel, who was playing Aglante, came to the speech, 'Have a care, madame, Love knows how to revenge himself on those who scorn him,' she burst into tears, real live tears which had no place on the stage. It was necessary to comfort her and bathe her eyes.

'Hubert,' whispered the Princess of Elis, 'go and say something sweet to your little cousin.'

'If I do,' replied the lad in the same tone, 'it will be for love of you. Do you realize, princess, that this role will end by making me give up all my philosophic detachment?'

'Now, now, none of that, monsieur. Go and comfort Aglante.'

Aglante smiled once more and the rehearsal went on with renewed fire after this strange interlude. Some fiddles were rehearsing softly in the lower hall. Euryale flung his book on the green bank, stretched himself at full length, face upturned to the sky, took a deep breath, and said loudly in his rough lisping voice:

'I declare to all those who love me that precisely three and a half minutes ago I began to feel happy and that for the next four days at least I am entering a zone of great gladness. Ah, here comes Prince Aristomène. And what can I do for you, monseigneur?'

Philippe had come up the steps of the terrace. With a bow he said:

'Princess, yonder is a stranger who begs the honour of being received by you.'

'Monseigneur,' replied the Princess of Elis, 'that is not in the play.'

'Possibly not, madame. I'm afraid I hardly know where the actual play begins, and above all where it leaves off'

'Oh, be serious, Philippe. Who is it who wants to see me?'

'A rather fat fellow, madame, whom up to now I have not had the honour of meeting in the Peloponnese.'

The princess signalled with her hand to break off the rehearsal and said wearily:

'Can't be helped! Show the stranger in.'

XVI

WHILE he drifts on the tide of dreams, while he wanders breathless among the creatures of an all-mastering imagination, it may happen that the sleeper puts forth a hand in the darkness and his groping fingers encounter some hard material object that bears witness to the life of reality: the wood of the bed-table, the crazy clock, the book, or the empty cup. It may happen that he opens an eye and catches a momentary glimpse of something appertaining to the restricted life of the living: a

window in the pale wash of dawn, with its dark lattice-work, a garment hanging against the wall, the black hump of a piece of furniture, familiar and yet strange. Then, at once disappointed and relieved, the sleeper turns in the moist warmth of the bed, hesitating on the frontier of two worlds.

It was in such a state of mind that the Princess of Elis contemplated the unexpected visitor. He was in fact, as Philippe had said, a rather fat fellow, rather short in the leg and wearing a shabby brown suit. He was carrying his felt hat in his hand and wiping his brow, for he had had a long tramp in the hot sun. He came forward smiling with outstretched hand. All at once he exclaimed in a strong, resonant voice:

‘What, Suzanne, more theatre? But this is competition!’

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. The Princess of Elis seemed embarrassed, almost ashamed, at having been caught in this array, taking part in this puerile entertainment among this crowd of children and young folk. Smiling vaguely, she shook hands with Paul Helloun in silence. The visitor’s brown suit, with its line of dust on the edge of the pocket flap, with its soiled facings, its shiny knees and elbows, had almost the effect of an insult among the Grecian tunics. This sweat-soaked garment exhaled the sordid force and intolerable odour of reality.

The visitor continued, speaking with somewhat less assurance:

‘I’m interrupting the performance. Please forgive me, Suzanne dear.’

The Princess of Elis smiled rather uneasily.

‘No, no, Helloun. Please sit down. Shall they bring you a chair, Helloun?’

‘No,’ he said positively, ‘I shan’t have time to sit down. My return train is in an hour and a half. I’m walking and there’s the hill to negotiate. I must have a word with you, Suzanne.’

There are people who express themselves cautiously, timidly, who murmur, for instance: ‘I should be so grateful if you

could spare me a few moments . . . I should be so pleased, my dear, if you could just let me have a minute with you. . . .’ That was not how Helloun expressed himself. Helloun, obviously, was the bearer of a message, and he declared bluntly: ‘Suzanne, I must have a word with you.’ And, wonderful to relate, the Princess of Elis did not look upon this shabby ambassador with an air of haughty disdain. She merely appeared to be somewhat shaken, with the nervous expression of someone awakened with a start by some news, not entirely unexpected, but which it had been supposed would not arrive quite so soon. And the Princess of Elis, lowering the heart-shaped palm-leaf fan that we see in the Tanagra figurines, replied submissively.

‘Let’s go up into the garden, Helloun. I’m listening’

The princes and the shepherds remained on the terrace. They seemed smitten with languor and discouragement. They stared at their costumes, their bare legs, their rose garlands with embarrassment and confusion. They were like creatures in a dream at the moment when the spell is about to be broken.

Philippe was frowning heavily, and as his hands were shaking he slipped them through his belt. Presently he tore off his tunic and threw it into the bushes. Then he went off to change into white linen trousers. All his movements were abrupt, nervous, almost unconscious. Without grasping the meaning of this change of behaviour the young people began talking in undertones and casting uneasy glances about them.

By stepping back a little one could get a view from the terrace of the path down the centre of the garden. The Princess of Elis was walking up and down with the fellow in the brown suit. It would have been difficult at that distance to overhear the conversation, but one could see their movements and guess something of what they were saying. Helloun was the first to speak; having done so, he mopped his brow and put on his hat again, like a man who has fulfilled his mission and said his say. After that it was evident that the

Princess of Elis was speaking in her turn. Sometimes she nodded her head. She appeared to be interested. She seemed at the same time displeased and stirred by curiosity, possibly by a stronger emotion. From afar, the discussion had the appearance of a quarrel. Then, no doubt with the conviction of having accomplished a duty, Hellouin took out a cigarette. He held it between two fingers of his left hand. With the forefinger of his right he absent-mindedly picked his nose, and nothing seemed likely to distract him from that delicate operation. The princess raised her voice. Thanks to a gust of wind one caught a snatch of what she was saying.

'Letting me know like this at the last minute! You will please say, Hellouin, that it is abominably discourteous . . .'

Hellouin raised his arms and let them fall again to express his helplessness as he said:

'Pooh! You 'll be able to tell him that yourself.'

They walked about for another few minutes, arguing in calmer tones. Then the messenger pulled out his watch, and definitely turned the princess towards the house. A minute later they appeared on the steps of the terrace. Hellouin was already taking his leave, hastily, jovially. He said with a general look round

'No, no, Suzanne, no time to stop. No time for a drink. Just let me trot off quickly. I 'll have something at the station, if there 's time. You looked lovely here. Charming, upon my word, delightful. If the *patron* were to see it, he 'd love it. The real open-air theatre. Now, good-bye, messieurs, mesdames, and mesdemoiselles. Good-bye, Monsieur Baudoin. We haven't been seeing you lately at Les Carmes. Oh, but we shall, later on. About the car, Suzanne; not before ten o'clock in the morning. Des Combes will come himself with his chauffeur. Bye-bye, my little Suzanne.'

He distributed a few absent-minded handshakes and then all at once he was gone. The brown suit was extirpated from the landscape like a foreign body. The Princess of Elis looked about her in wide-eyed astonishment. The shepherds, the satyrs, and the princes were as dumb as figures in a tapestry.

One could have fancied they were without life, faded and washed out. That solitary shadow of a cloud, that shadow which floated not an hour ago over the woods and pastures like a sorrow-laden thought, had it returned to spread over this happy hill-top? No, certainly not the sky was radiantly clear; and yet something disturbing, something painful, seemed now to intermingle with the light and spoil its brilliance. That look which fastened itself so persistently on the Princess of Elis was not the look of Aglante but came, charged with hatred, from the eyes of little Paule Châstel. That crimson face, distorted by a grin of anguish, could it really be the ingenuous visage of Marc the sculptor? And that archangel with tortured, quivering mouth certainly bore no resemblance to Philippe Aristomène, lord of Messene and crown prince of the musical hill-top. Suddenly Suzanne felt as if all her charming young playfellows had aged ten years in a moment, and that perhaps she would presently have the horrid experience of seeing the hair sprouting on their cheeks and chins and wrinkles furrowing their flesh.

'Philippe,' she said feebly, 'Philippe, we can't go on rehearsing any more to-day. I have something to say to you in private.'

'Where would you like to go?' faltered the young man. 'In the studio, in the open, or in the wood?'

'Let's go into the wood,' she said.

All the players looked at each other in consternation. Philippe and Suzanne went along towards the wood.

First of all they walked in silence. The young man had plucked a straw, a long stem of grass, already yellowed by the June sun, and was biting at it with a worried, stubborn expression. As they arrived under the shelter of the trees he exclaimed roughly:

'When are you leaving?'

She tried to smile, to play for time.

'But who has said, my lord, that I am to leave?'

He shrugged his shoulders

'Don't you realize, Suzanne, that I feel the things which

concern you just as if they were going on within my own being? Oh, I quite understand: you're leaving! That's clear. Only too clear, and horrible to think of. That's why I say: When are you leaving?'

'Who has said anything about leaving? Leaving? I shall be going to Paris to-morrow. . . .'

And as he made no rejoinder, she added:

'Someone is fetching me to-morrow morning.'

"Someone"? Oh, don't trouble to reply. You are caught again by what has really never let you go. What are these people, I ask you, who have the power to snatch you away from me like this with just a word, a wave of the hand?'

She turned her eyes away, to escape for a second from that searching look.

'I shall come back,' she whispered in a faint voice. 'I don't even know what it is they want'

'Really? You don't know?' he said. 'Well, I'm afraid I know only too well. All right. . . . Just let me pull myself together. I want to speak about this calmly. Yesterday, and even this morning, you were happy with us. I may be mistaken, but no, you were happy. It didn't even occur to you to hide the fact that you were happy. Is it really enough that this fat fellow should turn up? What did he say to you? What can he have said to you? You declare you are coming back and possibly you believe it. But I, I feel, I know, you won't come back'

She tried to hold out, saying in a plaintive voice:

'I shall come back very quickly, I assure you. You surely can't think it odd that I should go to Paris for a day to see to things? Am I here like Andromaque, a prisoner of Pyrrhus? Are you my friend, Philippe, or my tyrant?'

'No, no,' he broke in harshly 'You won't come back, you will never come back if you leave us now. Don't try to deceive me. Don't try to deceive yourself.'

And all of a sudden, because he was no longer master of his grief, he began to lament, to cry out in the silence of the trees:

'I've only myself to blame. I allowed myself to have illusions about you, and then about myself, yes, about myself I imagined . . . Good heavens! this kind of life that I love—I believed you could love it too. What foolishness! What foolishness! Never have I had from you a word, a sign of surrender. I go groping in the dark and you are never where I hope to find you. I am no companion for you, no husband for you. No, no, no! And it's not because I'm poor, or because of this injured foot, or because I'm this or that. You like me well enough, I know, but you can't love any one. You are incapable of loving. . . .'

He stopped for a second, out of breath. Then he murmured brokenly:

'You're inaccessible, Suzanne darling!'

'Philippe,' she exclaimed in angry astonishment 'You can't possibly know . . .'

No, certainly, he couldn't possibly have known that, long ago, Mme Pasquier was wont to say to her little youngest-born: 'Suze, you're inaccessible.' He could not possibly have known that, later on and on various occasions, wounded hearts had again hit on the same word: 'Inaccessible! You are inaccessible!' This word, which she barely understood, opened up an old wound. She was about to defend herself, to fight back, but the young man did not give her time.

'No,' he went on, 'to-day is my day, it's my turn to speak out. What I'm going to say to you I shall never be able to say to you again. I shall never have another chance. I must relieve myself of it. You're only capable of acting a part. You don't know how to live, you haven't even a genuine wish to live. You're beautiful, so very beautiful that the words seem to wither away when I dare to speak of you; but there is in your beauty something that makes my heart ache.'

'Philippe,' she said, while her hands clutched at her bosom, 'Philippe, hush! Can't you see that you are hurting me dreadfully?'

He was now quite pale with anger and despair. He went on upbraiding her:

'One day you said a terrible thing to me. You told me that probably you had no guardian angel. Well, I can believe that, it's surely so. It always seems to me that I can see angels behind people, but I never see yours, no, never have I seen yours. I shall never be able to draw your guardian angel. I shan't even draw your portrait again. It's unbelievable, unbelievable!'

Then, as though seeking an excuse, a loop-hole, she stammered under her breath a few words which he was hardly able to catch:

'You're a child: I'm older than you.'

'Say that again. No, no, don't. I've understood. But it isn't true. You're mistaken, Suzanne.'

In a loud voice he called out: 'Suzanne! Suzanne!' He flung her name towards the green canopy overhead, shattering the woodland silence. His cry was like an appeal for help from a drowning man about to sink for the last time.

'I had always thought,' he moaned, 'that I could only fall in love with a woman of my own kind, of my own race. And then you came into my life, and now, now, I can't even bear to think of what is to become of me.'

He dropped to the ground. He lay at full length, face downwards among the stones and mosses, the ferns and the brambles. He stretched out his arms and caught her by the ankles. Panting a little, he uttered wild words. His supplications, in this posture of humiliation, were full of pride.

'If you don't love me, me, it's because you can't love any one, because you're incapable of love, Suzanne darling.'

Then again he began to plead.

'Don't leave us yet. What should we do now without you? And me, me, what's to become of me?'

She lifted his head and raised him up. Gently she wiped his face, slipping a stealthy finger among his curls. One might have thought she was soothing an invalid. In a half-whisper she dropped friendly, quite tender phrases in his ear, and he gave way, on the verge of tears. At that moment she was genuinely grieved and sincere. For the first time Philippe

had really hurt her. She had promised to return and she would surely do so. She would return very quickly, possibly the same evening. Was it reasonable to inflict this horrible scene on her because she was going to Paris, for the first time since she had come to the hill-top? How many months had she now been with the Baudoins in the house on the hill?

He replied in the voice of a scolded child:

'Eight weeks all but three days.'

'Really!' she sighed. 'Eight weeks! Nearly two months! And I came first for just a short visit. Ah, Philippe, you're neither sensible nor just. I haven't deserved such treatment. Come, let's go in, please. I'll come back, yes, I'll come back.'

She was now quite positive that she would come back. She scolded him gently as they walked back slowly towards the house. She was trying to make him smile, but didn't succeed. When they reached the middle of the garden, Philippe stopped dead. He needed to be alone, he said, to go off by himself in the country, to be alone with his thoughts, alone with his love, alone with his grief.

He took a step backwards, wheeled round, and made off with a run towards the wood. He was quickly out of sight.

Suzanne made her way by herself down to the terrace. The princes, the shepherds, and the satyrs had all disappeared. On the rose bushes, on the lilacs, on the seats and lawns, could be seen all sorts of discarded draperies—veils, tunics, sandals, golden girdles, cardboard crowns, a fan, a sceptre of painted wood. The kingdom of Elis was given over to the grasshoppers and dragon-flies. Never mind! It would all begin again, the festal lights would be rekindled, since Suzanne was returning. She had made her decision: she was sure of returning.

She went into the house. Here and there she heard the sound of voices, but she did not meet any one. She went on to her room and sank into a chair. Through the open window she was first aware of the clump of honeysuckle which as evening came on gave out a scent sweeter than the sweetest of music, a fragrance the mere recollection of which would fill

Suzanne with poignant regret for the rest of her days. No, no, no regrets, since she was coming back, and she would again be able to enjoy that exquisite perfume of the night. Farther on were the terrace and the garden, blazing in the sun. Then beyond, the rustic machinery of the *noria* which pumped the water into the ponds, then the cordon trees, then the standard peach-trees already bearing a multitude of downy, pearl-grey fruit, still farther on the meadow, suffocating in the first heat wave, then the shoulder of the hill, laden with a crop of barley which was already turning yellow. This simple scene gave a feeling of innocent purity, of primitive happiness. That Suzanne's heart should stand still at this sight, already so familiar to her, was surely unreasonable, since she was to come back, was certain of coming back, was now ready to swear that she was coming back.

She opened a chest of drawers and began to take out her belongings in order to pack them in the cases.

She heard a scratch at the door and promptly said: 'Come in!'

The door opened and Céline appeared, looking very upset.

'Come,' she said softly 'They're up there, by the door of the studio, quarrelling like bulldogs. If there's any one who can calm them, it's you. So you must come.'

She followed the servant and made her way up the stairs, somewhat steep and winding, that led to the attics. She could hear loud voices in conflict above. A few more stairs and she caught sight of Marc. He had in his hand the small half-rusty hatchet which was used at the wood-pile for cutting up the faggots. Stooping towards the keyhole he was saying:

'Let me in, Hubert!'

'No,' replied his brother's voice. 'No, I know what you want to do and I tell you it's crazy.'

'Let me in, Hubert, or I shall break open the door.'

Suzanne hurried forward, snatched at the boy's wrist, and said angrily:

'Are you all going mad? What are you going to smash with that horrible tool? Do you want me to believe that

quarrelling goes on here, among brothers, at the *Cavée des Portes*?’

The lad, taken aback, went very red. He let the hatchet fall and Suzanne picked it up.

‘What were you going to smash?’ she inquired again ‘You grieve me very much. And I who thought of coming back . . .’

Shaken with emotion, he began to stammer:

‘You ’ll come back? You ’ll come back?’

‘Why, yes, you bad boy, of course I shall come back, but only if you ’re good and sensible. I’m going to take that hatchet and hide it in my room. I don’t like violent people, master door-smasher! Come, pull yourself together. Smile a little.’

Standing on tiptoe, for Marc was tall, she dropped a flying, sisterly kiss on his cheek, close to his eye. The boy was no longer red. He was now very pale. Smiling, Suzanne scolded him.

‘I shall come back, that ’s a promise. But you ’ll drive me crazy, like everybody here. Poor old Marc! Crazy, like all of you, bad boys that you are ’

While making her way downstairs a minute later, she repeated to herself: ‘I shall come back, I shall come back. But they ’ll drive me mad. This house, always so peaceful. . . Who would have guessed? I shall come back, I ’ve promised . . .’ She went on talking to herself as she folded her dresses and underclothes and laid them in the leather suitcases. She would come back, the very next day. She would teach those others, those people down there, those Paris people, that she was free and independent. . . Inaccessible. . . What did they mean by that extraordinary word? She wasn’t inaccessible. She was the gentlest, most sensitive, most faithful of women. . . . Only people didn’t understand her. Alas, they didn’t in the least understand her! How unfair people were to poor Suzanne!

She was overwhelmed with a rush of tender, affectionate compassion for herself which engrossed her until the evening.

XVII

It was barely twelve o'clock when Emmanuel des Combes put the young woman down at the door of the theatre.

'I'm only too pleased, Suzanne,' he said, 'to have been able to drop your luggage at the house and bring you along here so quickly. And now I must fly. Excuse me, Suzanne. I'm rushed, terribly rushed. The *patron* will tell you all about it. Remember he's expecting you. See you soon, Suzanne, my dear.'

With these mysterious words Emmanuel des Combes climbed back into his car, gave his orders, and drove off.

The girl didn't go into the theatre through the narrow stage entrance, but through the main public doorway as any visiting stranger might have done. The building was deserted and silent. Even on this glorious day of sunshine it was pervaded with a subterranean chill, the dankness of a catacomb. Suzanne had a passing glimpse of the cloak-room with its inane rows of pegs, and of the narrow foyer where excited people thronged during the *entr'actes* to exchange praise and criticism. The smoking-room was open. It exuded a smell of stale ash and of draperies reeking with cigarette smoke. This fug arrested Suzanne for a moment: she sometimes came here, not so long ago indeed, to rehearse with a fellow player if the stage was occupied. She walked on, and was soon in the auditorium. A hanging bulb hooked to the proscenium was shining harshly through the gloom. Grey linen dust sheets were thrown over the rows of stalls like shrouds over dead bodies. The cleaners had obviously not yet tidied up the place: one could see on the floor crumpled programmes, métro tickets, sweet wrappers, and all those bits and pieces which crowds, even civilized ones, leave behind them the litter of their pleasure. Her footsteps stirred a mawkish, dusty odour which to Suzanne was as her native air, and which to her astonishment she inhaled with delight.

She stopped again, tipped a seat forward, and sat down to

collect her thoughts and allow the emotions that filled her heart to subside. For a moment she imagined, forced herself to imagine, the nocturnal odours on the hill at Nesles, the scent of the honeysuckle that was like a soul that awakens only in the stillness of the night. She dilated her nostrils and breathed deeply. The smell that filled her throat and chest was certainly not that exquisite fragrance of the peaceful countryside, but a reek of closed cupboards, shabby furniture, human dust, and funeral urns. And yet this smell of a moribund theatre seemed to her the most delectable in the world.

This rectangular hall, so unsightly that in moments of discouragement Vidame used to liken it to a poor man's box, this hall slumbering under its rumpled covers, Suzanne had seen it, thousands of times, brilliantly lit up, seething with excitement, shaken by tempests of laughter or stirred by wild enthusiasm. From the depths of this hall, Suzanne had heard a thousand times the panting breath of an audience that, forgetting its trials and tribulations, had come there to weep over Iphigénie or to despair with little Hedvig Ekdal.

Suzanne turned towards the far end of this dark cavern. A little beyond the boxes on the right there was a peculiar zone from which, always at the same repartees, the laughs started and spread. Along the wall on the other side there was a region of alert responsiveness from which came the applause for everything that savoured of poetic refinement. The human content of that hall was renewed nightly; yet the theatre, once it was full, would always react in the same manner, perhaps owing to some peculiar effect of acoustics; perhaps because the stage business was exactly planned to dispatch effective points in this or that direction, always the same as far as experience went; perhaps because the house, like a madrepore, was not equally sensitive in every part to currents, rays of light, and passing breezes. There was in the second row a seat in which every evening, by the most extraordinary coincidence, there came and sat an old gentleman in mourning. It must, of course, have been a different old gentleman every evening, but there always was such an old gentleman. The bouquet

of violets or orchids always came from the same spot, just as thunderstorms always come from the south and sudden showers from the west. All those who sat in the little box on the left invariably fell in love with Suzanne, and all those spectators in the balcony who sat under the limelight projector sent her kisses and applauded so persistently that there never were fewer than five curtain calls. There were secret laws, mysterious, well-nigh sacred rules. The life of the theatre was made up of confused fables, of enigmas and superstitions over which Suzanne was never tired of pondering.

Sitting here, she murmured the line from *Tête d'or*, the line she had quoted once to the archangel Philippe: 'The day breaks! it breaks!' Thus it was for Suzanne: the day only really broke when it was the poets who called it suddenly into being between pasteboard walls and within the radius of the floodlights. Thus it was for Suzanne, and everything else on earth was nothing but malaise, melancholy, disappointment, and vague disquietude. Yes, Suzanne was made that way and she would never be other. Let that incomparable voice utter the simplest of statements: 'The day breaks. . . . The wind rises. . . . I have waited too long. . . . Je m'en souviens encore. Il était sur son char . . . '—let that voice of voices pronounce these humble words which do not appear to differ from those in daily use, and straightway for Suzanne life took on a meaning and a zest. She was in the habit of repeating snatches of parts she had played and of those she had long dreamed of playing. Thus it was, and no one could alter Suzanne's destiny. She murmured: 'Ah! que ne suis-je assise à l'ombre des forêts!' Good God! where then was the shadow of the forests? There, in that cavern, on that ultra-modern stage of compressed galalith, between the flats of sound-proof and fire-proof pasteboard? Yes, there, perhaps, there and nowhere else.

All at once she pictured to herself the woods and spinneys of La Tour-du-Laye. She had wandered among them many a time during this lovely spring, with Hubert, Philippe, or Marc, to pick the first lilies of the valley, wild hyacinths, or

lungwort. She fell into a deep reverie; she felt herself torn between two aspects of the world.

At last she rose and the clap of the tip-up seat quite startled her. She went up on to the stage, passed through the wings, and made her way along the corridor leading to her dressing-room. Nothing had changed in these regions where the seasons had no sway. The walls with their dingy distemper still exuded here and there a coffee-coloured trickle. The doors of the dressing-rooms were ajar. One caught sight of a wig on a wooden block, a gown edged with ermine, a cap with a feather. Finally she pushed open the door of her dressing-room and was quite astonished to find a light burning.

The little room was empty and just as Suzanne had left it two months ago. 'How odd!' she thought. 'Why haven't they put any one in it?' She was struck too by the scent of her dressing-room, a scent she had almost forgotten during the time she had spent over there on the enchanted hill-top. The scent had faded somewhat in the solitude and Suzanne felt as though she were dipping into one of those old caskets in which are hoarded letters, ribbons, a little bunch of withered daffodils, and a sprig of verbenä. But why in this deserted room did she find a light? She sat down at the dressing-table and let her hands wander over the shelves. She thought she had taken away all her little personal possessions. But she hadn't taken them all away. She had packed up in an angry mood, and now she could see all sorts of familiar trifles: the cut-glass box for hairpins, the bottles of almond lotion, the pots of cream, the nail-file, the tiny scissors, the tweezers, a china vase, in which, to her surprise, she saw a fresh flower, a lovely Bengal rose.

She opened the drawers. They were not empty. She had forgotten a whole set of make-up pencils and brushes, and even some hares' feet still powdered with carmine and ochre, and a book, yes, a book.

Between the pages of the book a small cock's feather had been slipped in as a marker. The book opened at this page and Suzanne read these words: 'Have you any commission

from your lord to negotiate with my face?' She knew those words well. It was the voice of the lady Olivia, the winged wit of the lady Olivia! Suzanne had always longed to play *Twelfth Night*. Could she really have forgotten to pack the book in the fury of her departure? Not a bit of it; this was not even a book of hers. Someone had purposely put this book in the drawer. She bent over it, turned the pages, and read aloud. 'Stay: I prithee tell me what thou think'st of me.'

The wheedling little phrase had hardly been uttered in the silence of this retreat when a voice answered from behind Suzanne: 'That you do think you are not what you are.'

Taken aback, she turned with the book in her hand. By sheer habit she took up the cue and replied. 'If I think so, I think the same of you.'

'Then,' replied Eric Vidame, 'you think right; I am not what I am.'

Thereupon he closed the door, sat astride on the visitor's chair, as he used to do and always would do, casually, as was his way, and said in his fine voice, that voice with the singing quality of a viol da gamba.

'No, no, my poor Suzanne, you are not what you are. No, no, my sweet Suzanne, I am not what I am. . . Come, we've got to talk, Suzanne. I expected you before this.'

'Forgive me,' she said. 'I wasted a little time thinking about the past.'

'We shan't have any time to waste on dreams between now and Saturday, Suzanne.'

'And why not, I should like to know?'

'Because,' he said firmly, 'we're leaving here the day after to-morrow.'

'You're leaving? I'm very glad. Bon voyage, monsieur.'

Vidame clicked his tongue sharply against his teeth as one does to call to order someone who is taking liberties.

'Tss, tss! be good enough to believe, Suzanne, that I know what I'm saying. When I say we are leaving, I mean, dear lady, that you are leaving too, that you are leaving with me and that we are all leaving together.'

Now he was imitating Feste, the lady Olivia's fool. He looked across at Suzanne with a wheedling, bantering twinkle. Then he added without as much as waiting for a reply:

'We are going for a long trip, madonna. We shan't see France again before the end of the autumn'

She stiffened, and planted herself as firmly as she could to resist the attack. Turning her head she said coldly: 'Very well, go, monsieur, go!'

'No, madonna, no. We are going and you are going with us to South America: Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Rio, São Paulo, Pernambuco, Bahia, and many other places. A long trip, a beautiful trip, that we have no intention of making without Suzanne. What should we do without Suzanne?'

'Oh,' she said bitterly, 'you've got on very well for the last two months without Suzanne.'

To indicate denial, he wagged his forefinger to and fro like the pointer of a pair of scales.

'Now, now, madonna, be serious and sensible. We have let you have your whim, a somewhat protracted caprice. But that is over, madonna. We must be off. Who, I ask you, would play Elvire and Marianne, Monime and Célimène, Lucinde and Carmosine?—for we are going to produce *Carmosine*. And who would be Olivia, yes, Olivia, I ask you, if Suzanne indulges herself in another whim? Answer me, madonna.'

Suzanne had risen in unfeigned anger.

'You have offended me,' she declared, 'you have offended me, Vidame, for reasons which I can't make out, for mean, shabby reasons, reasons unworthy of you and certainly of this theatre, reasons which I would rather not understand fully. You have offended me, and I am not sure that you're not offending me still further with your pretty speeches, your mocking good humour, your extravagant promises, the way you have of treating us as if we were empty-headed dolls, and all those shady dealings behind our backs which, if we actually knew what you were up to, would certainly humiliate and disgust us. . . I am not your devoted servant like your

friend M. des Combes. I am not your slave like the wretched Hellouin. I am Suzanne Pasquier.'

Vidame had risen in his usual fashion, with a careless fling of his leg over the back of the chair. He no longer wore that sarcastic air, he looked weary and discouraged. Now he spoke very softly, always in a well-placed voice, but in a pathetic tone of self-pity. Indeed he was utterly misunderstood and there was not a soul he could rely upon. Was it his fault if the theatre was inextricably involved in loathsome money difficulties? Was it his fault if to keep a theatre going you had to pay rent, taxes, designers, electricians, the press, yes, the press, and even high and mighty actors who grumbled behind his back, but who like everybody else had to live, clothe themselves, and eat? Was it really such an easy task to manage this place and in spite of all these worries keep alive in it the flickering flame of the spirit? No doubt, like other people and because there was no other way out, he had done things he didn't approve of, things he was ashamed of, things which strictly speaking might be called dirty tricks, but he simply had no choice and he simply had to do them. But the theatre was a success and that was what mattered. Which of them stood by and helped Eric Vidame? Who was there who understood him? Not a soul. Not even Suzanne, least of all Suzanne, alas! And yet Suzanne was the most intelligent of the company, the clearest-sighted of all those self-centred conceited children. Then like a bombshell had come this mission from the Government, this heaven-sent mission! All expenses covered in advance, and tremendous profits in prospect, sufficient to provide for at least a year in this ruinous, ravenous Paris. Sufficient to produce *L'Échange*, *Brand*, *The Tempest*, and possibly the second part of *Faust*. Yes, why not the second part of *Faust*? Enough money—since that was everlastingly the word—enough money to enable one to do here in Paris the most wonderful and difficult, the rarest and most daring things. Four or five months to spend on the other side of the earth, carrying the banner of French culture among friendly nations. . . . No? Not a word

from her? And the bitterest part of it all was that Suzanne was a real woman of the theatre, one might almost say a child of the theatre. Well, it was unbelievable. A woman who was really devoted to the theatre would have been ready to show her trust in her *patron*, in spite of a few slips. If only she knew what mountains of misunderstandings . . . Obliterate all memory of these wretched disputes, that was what one should learn to do. Suzanne could look about her: where would she find a theatre which in one and the same season did honour to Euripides and Shakespeare, Racine, Goethe, and Calderon, to say nothing of the moderns, and especially the youngsters, who were so uncommonly grasping, so aggressive, and above all so ungrateful?

Vidame had not raised his voice for a moment during this long monologue. Sometimes he would let shoulders and arms droop in a well-calculated gesture of discouragement and disillusion. Suzanne listened attentively, her brows drawn together. Little by little Suzanne's lips parted, revealing those lovely teeth. Little by little Suzanne's golden eyebrows relaxed their frown, softened, and began to twitch. She had a vague feeling that he was acting as always here, as always in the theatre, acting a crooked comedy of which she could understand nothing. And she felt too that Vidame was once again playing his best cards, playing to win. She felt that she could still resist him, but that she would not have the strength to resist him to the end, and that really she did not greatly wish to do so.

When Vidame once again called to his rescue the heroes of poesy, the demigods of the theatre, Suzanne's beloved masters, she had suddenly a fleeting glimpse of the happy hill-top, a vision of the house at Nesles. The image was precise in detail, but faint and translucent—an image in process of dissolving in some corrosive liquid.

'Well, it can't be helped, little Suzanne,' said Vidame, spreading out his arms. 'We shall have to go off to America without you, my poor Suzanne. And in order to give all these people a true picture of France we shall take with us the

charming demoiselle Praga, who certainly has talent, but whose accent doesn't exactly call up Touraine and Normandy. It's your fault, madonna.'

Then Suzanne dropped her head and said very swiftly, in a faint voice, a miserable, faint little voice:

'If it's absolutely necessary, *patron*, I'll do as you wish. You must admit you are making an unreasonable demand on me: less than forty-eight hours . . .'

'Not a bit of it, madonna! For a true woman of the theatre like you it's nothing out of the way. The parts? We shall have time for study on the boat. Think of it, nearly three weeks.'

'Oh, the parts,' she said excitedly, 'the parts, you know quite well I have them all by heart.'

'You must give me a few minutes more, Suzon. There are a host of little matters to settle and some tiresome documents to examine.'

He now drew himself up, like a surgeon who has just completed an operation, certainly not a difficult one, but none the less requiring a steady hand and a sure eye. He put an arm round Suzanne's waist and gave her a swift kiss on the hair line, the kiss of a grand seigneur, a feudal kiss; then he hurried her away, for he was rushed, terribly rushed, and he had still thousands of tiresome matters to attend to. . . .

Ten minutes later, Suzanne left the theatre. She was flushed, and she set her teeth as though to fortify all her resolutions. She had not gone more than ten yards when she almost bumped into a perspiring Hellouin going up the rue des Carmes.

'Well?' he inquired. 'Well, Suzon, coming along with us?'

And when she gave a little nod of acquiescence, the old blunderer let out a long sigh of relief.

'No doubt he told you, my little Suzon, what a thorn in the flesh you were ridding us of. The Praga woman is a poisonous creature. She went off three days ago without a word of warning. She has thrown over Chérouvier, the theatre, Paris, and everything else. One can only suppose

she has got what she wanted. . . . She doesn't care a damn about contracts. She won't show herself again. And the tour would have gone phut. Oh, yes, that little Éva Jonquière . . . quite good as an understudy. But you can't have her playing all the young leads. And just imagine, Suzon, the cabins were booked three weeks ago. Luckily you're a good pal, my little Suze. Luckily you have a genuine love of the theatre. Luckily women like you . . .'

Suzanne was hardly listening. What did they matter to her, these little deceits, these wretched intrigues, these lies? Oh, yes, she had been taken in, duped, beguiled, oh, in the twinkling of an eye, like Lady Anne by Gloucester. But she had only been deceived because she wanted to be. She never did, and never would, do anything she didn't want to. And she definitely did want to go to South America, to act, to play Olivia, Lucinde, and Célimène. She hadn't really been tricked, because she had guessed beforehand that there would be trickery. And as for the household at Nesles, as for those dear boys at Nesles . . . Oh, she was to have gone back there. . . . She had said: 'I shall come back. . . .'

She broke away hurriedly from Hellouin. She was feeling upset. Her cheeks were burning and at the same time across her chest she had a painful, very painful feeling of heaviness and cold.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that in turning into the boulevard Saint-Germain she very nearly ran into a poor creature carrying a placard with the ridiculous inscription: 'Dress like the rich. Get your clothes from Boucard!'

She read and re-read this absurd advice while stammering apologies. She looked about her dazedly. Never had she felt at the same time this heat on her face and this chill on her chest. But where was the post office?

Standing before a desk spotted with ink she attempted to compose a telegram. It was, it had to be, a very long telegram. She couldn't seem to find suitable words. She had to set to work three times over, tear up a form, begin again, tear up another, and once more struggle with a recalcitrant splut-

tering pen, a pen which refused to play the part of a willing accomplice.

When the telegram was at last written she couldn't make up her mind to give it in. She hesitated for some time and finally slipped it into her handbag. She would come back, she would come back and send it off. Later on, a little later on . . .

Suzanne stepped out on to the pavement and tried to collect herself. She had about thirty-six hours to pack her trunks, visit her family, settle her affairs, and make all the arrangements that have to be made when one is going off on a long trip. And she must get some lunch, for it was already after one o'clock. As it happened, she wasn't hungry. No, not in the least. Only that burning of her cheeks and that chill on her chest, that oppressive icy void in the middle of her chest.

XVIII

THE telegram did not reach Nesles until the next day about the middle of the morning. It was addressed to the master of the house, but Jérôme Baudoin was unable to read it, and for a moment he held the paper between his fingers without speaking. Then he stretched out his hand and said:

'Philippe! Philippe! Read this, please.'

The two were sitting side by side on a stone seat in the courtyard in the shade of the lilacs. It was hot. A light mist rising from the ground announced that the day would not pass without thunder. Philippe read the telegram and, as he said nothing, Jérôme laid a hand which trembled slightly on the young man's shoulder. They remained thus for some minutes without moving, then M. Baudoin whispered:

'You're unhappy, my Philippe?'

A broken, hesitant voice, the voice of a child in grief, replied a moment later:

'Yes, father.'

It is not really easy to check them in their course, these great lads who have grown into men. They are always so proud, so hurried, so stubbornly set on their secret plans. They don't know how to show their affection; they don't even want to show it; above all, they are filled with shame at the idea that they might be suspected of experiencing such a weakness. In the presence of their father and mother they hold themselves stiffly, with a bored expression, disdainful and inattentive, all ready for flight, like those shy animals who won't even allow you to stroke them. And now, suddenly under the touch of the paternal hand all resistance melts away. Something has been said in a low tone, something that isn't even a question: 'You're unhappy . . .' And the great boy answers in a faint, broken voice: 'Yes, father' It is the very voice, childish and tearful, of long ago, when, during nights of fevered sickness, he was carried with long strides up and down the close chamber and rocked and sung to sleep. Ah, but he is no longer a little child. He has lived through the war: he has suffered in the trenches. And to end with he received that wound which almost made a cripple of him. And when Jérôme, with his own affliction of darkness still new upon him, went to visit Philippe at Châlons, now some three years ago, the young man on his hospital bed was full of energy. He declared with a laugh: 'Why, it's nothing I'm going on splendidly.' It was the flesh only that was damaged. And now the lad is weak and wretched. He is unprepared for this kind of unhappiness. He doesn't even take up the defensive, makes no attempt even to slip away. He yields his cheek to the cheek that is seeking him, and he utters quite simply those two little words: 'Yes, father'—those two little words that acknowledge the anguish of his defeat.

They remained thus for a long while on the stone seat in the shade. Now and again Jérôme would draw Philippe towards him and drop a timid kiss on his hair, on his temple. Finally the young man rose very quietly and went into the house.

Step by step he climbed the staircase with its whitewashed walls. Instead of a rail there was a heavy ship's cable kept in place at intervals by iron rings. A hundred times Suzanne's fingers must have glided like a shiver along this old rope. A hundred times Suzanne's feet, flitting from floor to floor, had lightly traversed the oaken boards and the red-painted tiles. A hundred times, more than a hundred times, perhaps . . . and yet all this had left no more trace than the flight of a butterfly on the air of a sultry summer's day. He went along the corridor as far as Suzanne's room, and then, before going in, he did an absurd thing: he knocked, as if one could get a reply from a phantom. The room was empty. The wardrobe gaped wide and most of the drawers of the chest were half open. The room was empty, and not as a room might be that is not in use, but as a room from which something has been taken. The window was swinging behind the closed shutters and even the scent of Suzanne had already evaporated. On the dressing-table was a little hand mirror, an antique mirror which, for amusement, Marc had furnished with a carved wooden frame. Philippe picked up the mirror, and the mirror showed him the pale, drawn face of a suffering and dejected young man. It preserved no memory of Suzanne. A hundred, a thousand times perhaps, that gracious image had appeared within that frame among the cherubs and the cherry blossom. Nothing remained of that lovely vision. Philippe put the mirror back on the table. He thought of those aviaries where a twinkling looking-glass dangles beside the cuttle-bones on which the gaily coloured birds come and sharpen their beaks.

The mirror was empty, the wardrobe was empty, the chest was empty, and empty, too, the cupboards; empty, stark empty, was all Suzanne's bedroom. She had said she would come back, that she would be coming back at once, and yet she had taken everything. Does one do that when one intends to return? Philippe began to search the furniture, piece by piece, in a sort of blind fury. He wanted Suzanne to have forgotten something. He wanted, at any price, to find some small

possession of hers, a trace, a vestige, an unquestionable relic of Suzanne.

He did at last come across a black pin, a long black hairpin. He held it between his slender fingers and stared at it with a sort of calm despair, as he might have stared at the skeleton of his dream. A wretched hairpin, and that was all! He recalled with a further access of bitterness that Hubert had nicknamed Suzanne 'the pin-charmer.' A pin, and that was the least dead thing in the whole room!

Then some words of Suzanne came into his mind, a sentence murmured in the hubbub of the railway station: 'The idea that I could give any sort of pledge is disquieting and worrying me a little.' Could it be that under that air of lightness Suzanne was really prudent and calculating? Well, she need never be afraid of having given what she called a 'pledge.' She had never given anything, never promised anything of the kind. If by any chance she was at that moment questioning herself in the privacy of her conscience, she certainly had no impulse of generosity to reproach herself with. It cost her nothing to refrain from giving or promising. She was as empty as this room, empty as the little mirror, empty as the whole world in the eyes of Philippe.

He pulled out his wallet and slipped Suzanne's hairpin inside it between two papers, like a dead flower. Surely the driest and most lifeless of souvenirs, that little bit of black wire. Philippe was making a laborious effort to set his unhappy thoughts in order. He could not even claim that he had been betrayed or deceived, since Suzanne had never given him anything, lent him anything, or even promised him anything. He reflected that some men can find a sort of consolation in suffering: they can be proud of the fact that they suffer. But for him there was no such thing. He was a man dispossessed, but only of a shadow, only of a day-dream. He kept on going over the story of this unhappy love, this senseless love in which he alone had done all the spending, and he found hardly anything worth the telling. It was an unprofitable sorrow, not vital and generous as he would have

wished, but arid, sterile, lifeless as this hairpin. And for the rest of his life he would have to harbour and nourish this gnawing parasite.

He opened the shutters and looked out into the garden. All the shrubs and trees were flourishing in their wonted places. The world was as usual. No, the world was dead, too, dead and mummified. The house seemed stricken. Mme Baudoin and the girls were sewing in the lower hall. One could hardly hear them, they were talking in such subdued tones. Little Paule Chastel had remained locked in her room since the previous evening. She refused to come out, saying she wasn't hungry, but only had a bad headache. From time to time she could be heard singing softly, crazily

Philippe looked at the sky. Dark, heavy clouds were banking up over the valley of the Oise. It was barely eleven o'clock and already the heat was oppressive. The young man fell into a dreary reverie. From time to time a voice came up to him from below. The blind man was still sitting under the lilacs. He would call out: 'You're there, Philippe? Are you still there, my boy?' and Philippe would reply dutifully: 'Yes, father.'

Suddenly from the top of the house came the sound of angry voices. Ever since the previous day the quarrel between Hubert and Marc only seemed to die down in order to flare up again. Then there was a terrific noise of splintering glass, and something heavy and hard fell with a thud on the courtyard pavement. There was a wild stampede on the stairs and corridors. Hubert's voice was heard exclaiming: 'It's idiotic, what you're doing.'

On the pavement, amidst the broken glass, Philippe could now see a great block of oak. It was the bust of Suzanne on which Marc had been working constantly for the last two months. Heart of oak! A fine block of close-grained wood, a choice piece which had not even cracked after falling two storeys. Philippe from his window could make out the figure lying face upwards amidst the clutter of glass. The face had already been carefully chiselled and very delicately polished.

Sometimes in the studio Philippe had stroked the tender oval of that face as he passed. . . .

At that moment Hubert and Marc burst into the courtyard, Hubert exclaiming:

'You might have killed someone. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!'

Marc was not listening, he looked like a wild beast. He was livid, haggard, like those quiet and reserved children who once or twice a year fly into a foaming rage. He had got hold of the chopper again and had it in his hand. Straightway he began hacking with all his might. The steel bit into the oak and sent the chips flying. Within a second that polished face was crushed, mutilated, split asunder. The young madman went on hacking, panting like a wood-cutter. Hubert, suddenly cool, hands in pockets, said with a shrug:

'You might have made me a present of it, unfinished as it was, I admired it very much, I assure you. But to go and pitch it out of the window! And now to smash it to smithereens, to whack at it as you would at a tree-stump—Marc, you're a brute!'

Marc went on striking and raging:

'No, no, I must destroy it since I can't finish it. I tell you I don't want to see it any more. I hate it. It disgusts me.'

Clustered at the window of the lower hall, Mme Baudoin and the girls stared aghast at this scene of carnage. M. Baudoin had risen and was stretching out his hands. He said in a shaky voice: 'Come, come, my poor boys!' Philippe, from his window above, listened to all this angry scene with an expression of horrified astonishment on his face. Was it possible that he was not the only one to suffer? And he had never noticed anything! It had never dawned on him! Could it be that he too was blind and deaf? One knew nothing about Marc. One could never imagine what was going on inside Marc.

When that fine block of oak was reduced to splinters, to mere dust, Marc threw down his tool and mopped his brow. He seemed satisfied. His face began to come to life again. He caught Hubert by the shoulder and said:

'Now that's all over, let's get out'

'Where do you want to go?'

'On the plateau, the two of us.'

Mme Baudoin called out from the lower hall:

'Jérôme, go with them, please. Don't leave them alone.'

But already the two boys were striding off through the garden. At first they went along without speaking: they were going up hill, walking fast, and needed all their breath. At last they came among the fields of clover, wheat, and oats under a sky peopled with larks. From time to time Hubert repeated obstinately:

'If you didn't want the thing, you might have given it to me. I thought it was jolly good.'

Marc shook his head and went on walking without a word, staring down at the stones on the path. Then suddenly he stopped. And now once more he was deadly pale. A fresh wave of anger was welling up from the depths. He looked dogged and evil, his expression distorted by the many thoughts which stirred in his lonely soul, all those torturing thoughts which he was incapable of expressing. He cried aloud, fumbling for his words and flinging them forth haphazard:

'It's your fault. Yes, every bit of it is your fault. I tell you it's your fault, Hubert. I detest your way of talking to Suzanne, and I detest that way you have of taking hold of her by the arm or the waist. . . . And everything you say to her. . . . And even the way you look at her.'

'Poor Marc! But you're crazy,' said his astonished brother.

Wild with rage the boy repeated: 'It's all your fault! I hate you!' And all of a sudden he raised his fist and struck Hubert in the face.

It was not a blow delivered at full strength. All the same, a mark appeared on Hubert's temple. A mark and a drop of blood. He pulled out his handkerchief and took a step backwards. He was in despair. He repeated: 'You're crazy!' He was ready to weep as he stood there among the clumps of artemisia under the dazzling sky. Then Marc flung himself on the ground and began to wail.

'Forgive me, forgive me,' he panted. 'Oh! don't tell any one. Forgive me, Hubert. I simply had to hit someone, hurt someone, so as to relieve my feelings. And you're the one I hit, brother, because you're the one I love, yes, because I love you more than all the others. Tell me you forgive me, or I shall kill myself, or I shall cut my throat with my pocket-knife.'

Hubert went on his knees and stroked his brother's face. He spoke confusedly and his heavy lisping voice was choked with tears.

'I don't mind a bit I tell you I don't mind a bit. . . A good blow with the fist, yes, I understand, it relieves you. It didn't hurt, really. I shall say I fell down. Only you've got to calm down. What would mother think? What would father think? We'd better get back at once. I shall go to Paris to-night. I've got to go to Paris to-night.'

Marc heard nothing of these friendly words. He was still lying with his head among the thick-growing grass. And he kept on repeating in a low voice:

'Forgive me; I'm miserable! You can't guess how miserable I am. Look, look, how miserable I am!'

XIX

NIGHT was falling. The thunderstorm which had long been hovering over Paris was now gathering towards the north behind Montmartre. It was not raining, but great flashes of lightning throbbed amongst the clouds, momentarily revealing an unfamiliar city, pallid and lugubrious.

Suzanne drew the curtains and switched on a light. Then she sat down on a chair and remained there for a short time motionless, almost at the end of her tether. The day was over and all its tasks completed. There would be nothing more to do in the morning than to pick up a small leather case and a travelling coat, then turn the key in the lock, and shut the door finally on all tormenting memories. To-morrow

morning, at dawn, the car was to come and fetch her. The luggage had already gone. Suzanne had run a thousand errands, called at consulates, and been hunting in shops. Finally she had gone to say good-bye to all the members of her family who were in Paris.

It was not a complicated business at the end of June 1921. Cécile was touring Sweden, giving concerts; Laurent was in Lisbon for a congress of biologists; Joseph Pasquier had just left for Egypt and certainly not for the purpose of admiring the land of the Pharaohs, as it was a question of ascertaining if western Europe was to eat the rice of the fellahs or that of the Annamites. She, Suzanne, was about to take flight to the other side of the globe. The entire Pasquier family was scattering, like a set-piece rocketing brilliant fireworks to every point of the compass.

So Suzanne had seen her brother Ferdinand and her plump little sister-in-law, both of them victims of a *maladie imaginaire* of a very alarming kind which entailed constant references to the sympathetic system and high blood-pressure. Ferdinand and his wife were also travelling, on a fussy, fidgety trip to the frontiers of health.

Suzanne had seen her parents. Doctor Raymond Pasquier rambled magnificently. He was thin, and consumed with new ambitions. He was writing a philosophical treatise. He was also writing his memoirs, and he couldn't refrain from reading a page of them to Suzanne, yes, his visit to M. Thiers, in 1871 at Versailles. . . . Mme Lucie-Éléonore Pasquier was now very old, almost helpless. She gazed with admiration mingled with terror at this life-companion of hers, this aged incorrigible child. The curtains of the flat were black with smoke from the incandescent burners. It was with a feeling of distress that Suzanne contemplated these ravaged old faces. The barrier between Suzanne and the obscure future, between Suzanne and the unknown, between Suzanne and possibly something still more dreadful, death itself perhaps—this barrier which still sheltered Suzanne now seemed to her frail and shaky indeed. Just a little more time and the old

Pasquiers would finally disappear. Then the Pasquier children, Suzanne, her sister, her three brothers, would suddenly find themselves like soldiers whose turn has come to move into the front line.

Sitting between her father and her mother, Suzanne had dined hurriedly. Then she had gone back to her own place, and now she was alone, alone on the verge of this last night, alone in the little sitting-room, smelling of fly-tox, camphor, and lavender water. Two months ago her old servant, Antonine, had gone back to her province, as she always did when Suzanne was away touring. She was quite alone. What more was there to do before trying to get to sleep? She must write a letter, the letter, the dreadful letter which would be addressed, no doubt, to Mme Jérôme Baudoin, since her telegram had ended with the words 'letter following' Yes, that letter must be written. The evening must not go by without that letter being written.

She sat down at her dressing-table, turned on the side lights, and began to undo her hair. Until quite recently this moment was the one in which Suzanne tasted her sweetest pleasure, in which she gave herself up frankly and wholeheartedly to the contemplation of her person. Suzanne's hair was golden, with flaxen locks mingled with strands of a brighter hue, as in days gone by, and indeed for two-thirds of a century, had been those of her illustrious father. It was at the same time thick and fluffy. It frothed and shone. When Suzanne pulled out the few restraining hairpins, her lovely hair, released, poured down her shoulders, and at this fluid caress she experienced a strange pleasure, nearly akin to voluptuousness.

She undid her hair, then, and looked for herself in the mirror, as she did night and morning, as she did a hundred times a day, as she had never ceased to do since the beginning of the world. There was always, in that first look of Suzanne's in her mirror, something like a prayer. And always the mirror, like some benevolent idol, responded readily, generously. It was a ritual duet, and when it had been chanted to the very

last verse, Suzanne felt at peace, satisfied, and ready to yield to the delights of sleep.

Now, on this oppressively hot night, Suzanne's mirror seemed to her for the first time to be charged with dim denial. She thought she detected on this smooth, pure face a multitude of new lines, planes, and hollows. She switched on more light, but the mirror, like a stagnant pool, remained turbid and unresponsive.

Between the sublime and the ridiculous, between clarity and obscurity, between exquisite beauty and sullen ugliness, there is often but a tiny step, an imperceptible shade of difference. Gazing in her mirror, Suzanne discovered suddenly, oh, certainly not the face of an old woman, no, but the joyless face of an ageing and weary girl. For instance, at the corners of the eyes there were clusters of unfamiliar lines. The delicate modelling of the mouth was unimpaired, but two little incisions leading down from the mobile nostrils now marked a separation between that mouth and the velvety cheeks. Faint yet already indelible furrows ringed the snowy neck. What did these furrows mean? Suzanne had not noticed them the evening before. Weren't they due to some evil illusion? Suddenly, exaggerating and distorting her expression, she saw before her the ravaged countenance of Raymond Pasquier. She rose to her feet, shut her eyes to banish the vision, and then began to pace up and down the room. She shivered in spite of the thundery heat.

She dared not look again into that treacherous mirror. She might see herself there without teeth, without eyelashes or eyebrows, without her lovely silky hair, a complete wreck.

For the first time in her life Suzanne realized with desperate force that she was of mortal mould. That wild boy Hubert used to say: 'As for me, I shall never grow old!' Could Suzanne still make such an assertion without exposing herself to derision? She put her hands to her head. Dark thoughts began to creep about that charming head.

She came back to her mirror. She had to now! By a tremendous effort of will, by an effort of her whole being,

she sat down before her dark and fateful mirror. The spell must have worn off. What she saw now was the charming image of an immortal Suzanne. But her heart could no longer yield to the sweet intoxication. With bitterness she contemplated those beautiful hands which had never, like her mother's, like poor Lucie-Éléonore's, had to undertake any painful drudgery. Without satisfaction she contemplated those beautiful firm breasts which had never been swollen with milk. With a pain which was quite new to her she contemplated that beautiful mouth, that golden mouth whose lips could frame such harmonious phrases, phrases which she found in the writings of the poets but which never rose from the depths of her own being.

She had no right to complain. It did not occur to her to complain. She had chosen her way and her life of her own free will. And perhaps this life was but a shadow of the real, living life. Never mind! It was too late. She had renounced that real, living life for the sake of what, of whom? For the sake of the gloom and dust of the theatre during the hours of rehearsal, for the sake of those intractable crowds, often stupid and always ungrateful, who flattered her with their looks, their sighs, and their clamour, and no doubt forgot her directly they turned their backs.

She had chosen. And what had she chosen? To give up her life, all her life, yes, the whole life of Suzanne, to shadows, to mere smoke. Vidame had whistled to her as one whistles to a well-trained pet, and she had run to him, only too happy to be recalled. Had she no pride? Vidame, that cunning angler, had baited his line with a tempting role; he had hung the charming phantom of Olivia on the hook, and Suzanne had been caught on the spot, like a little shining fish.

She had given her life to shadows, to spectres. She had given her life to dreams. And yet, where was the most beautiful dream to be found. On the cellulose-galalith stage, at the little Théâtre des Carmes, facing the corpses in the stalls? Or up there, on the hill-top at Nesles, among the scents of a green garden after rain? Yes, where was the dream?

But what was the good of asking, since it was already too late?

Yesterday, even, she could have put out a hand, she could have opened her arms. . . . But no, she had coquetted with them all, she had acted a part with all those boys, just as she had done before with Richard Fauvet, with Roch, with Testevel, with Larseneur, with every one and always. Had she really gone so far on her road in life that she could not turn back and begin afresh? Yes, yes, she had gone too far. It was much too late.

For the first time Suzanne actually felt what she imitated so well under the limelights before the audience. the anguish of an aching heart. Indeed, she was suffering something painful and heavy stirred slowly in her breast. Since yesterday her cheeks were burning and her heart was cold.

She rose slowly and took a few steps across the room. A tiny feather from the cushions fluttered in the sultry air. She caught it and then let it go. Had she any more life than that scrap of swan's down? Come, courage! She must write a letter and then get some sleep.

She heard the first drops of a heavy shower falling on the balcony. How alone she was to-night! She had always lived alone and it had never worried her. All of a sudden, solitude seemed unbearable. She looked about her with eyes affrighted, full of pleading.

It was at that moment that she heard the hall bell.

She went as far as the door. But she dared not open it. She only ventured to murmur: 'Who 's there? Who are you?'

Then, from outside in the empty stairway, a heavy lisping voice answered, saying: 'It's me!'

She opened at once and took the lad by the hand. She whispered:

'You're crazy! Out in this deluge of rain! Get out of that trench-coat. Now take off your gloves and come along. What have you come for, Hubert?'

He began to stammer. He was at the same time distressed and pleasurably excited—distressed at what he had to say and

excited at being there, at Suzanne's, with Suzanne, while the rain beat down on the city and the thunder shook the house.

He was now standing in the middle of the room, facing Suzanne, and he did not try to apologize, but smiled hopefully, eagerly. She couldn't imagine, he said, how miserable they were at Nesles, at the Cavée des Portes. Every one was too miserable for words; it was pitiful. He himself was as miserable as the rest. He saw no way of escape from the misery. The house was sick and sunk in stupor. Then it occurred to him, without consulting anybody, that the best thing to do would be to take the evening train and come like this in the night, and find Suzanne and take her back. Yes, he had thought that the only way of getting her back would be to come and plead with her, and even kneel to her. .

He went down on his knees, as he did everything, with an easy grace that she could not help admiring. Kneeling thus before her he continued in a voice unsteady with emotion:

'I've always been told I was the madman of the family, but this time, Suzanne darling, unbelievably enough I'm the wisest of them all. So you must come back.'

He said 'Suzanne darling' just like all the others. She gazed at him with wonder and sadness. He was charming, and so young! He looked like a wild god, a spirit of the woods and thickets. She saw him before her like the angel of the enchanted hill. There were raindrops in his hair, in his finely traced eyebrows, and even on the tips of his long silky lashes. They looked like tears. Perhaps they were tears. She pulled out her handkerchief and immediately changed her mind. She wished to wipe away those tears, furtively, with her lips. This she did and the president of the Club of the Indifferents began to tremble all over.

He had laid his head on Suzanne's lap. Just where the hair began she noticed a spot, a blue bruise. She asked: 'What has happened to you?' He replied: 'I fell, Suzanne darling.' Then he began repeating: 'Come back, Suzanne darling.'

Suzanne shook her head. Alas, it was too late to begin her life again, too late to take a new turning, too late to seek

happiness in the same way as other women. But she could at least bid a solemn and heart-rending farewell to this lost happiness. She could bestow on this fair suppliant youth, on this bedazzled child, a princely alms.

First she rose unsteadily to her feet, then she put out the lights. With blind gestures she sought him in the darkness.

Later on, when the youth awoke from his ecstasy, he realized that as she lay in his arms she was weeping.

He strained her to him once more with all his naïve strength. He stammered childish words, confused and tender words, striving to staunch this flow of grief which was beyond his comprehension.

XX

'I've travelled a great deal,' said Eric Vidame, 'and often by sea. That doesn't prevent my always having a sort of nip in the pit of my stomach at this precise moment when the space between the ship's side and the wharf suddenly becomes too wide to be cleared, even by a good jumper.'

Drawn by frenzied tugs, the great boat approached the fairway. The passengers were still shouting to the friends they had left on the quay, but the voices were getting fainter. Soon they would be swallowed up in the rain-soaked void. On account of the tide sailing had been postponed till the late afternoon. All the actors, leaning over the rail, gazed now towards the shore where handkerchiefs were waving, and now at the muddy current carrying along patches of oil, orange-peel, barrel-hoops, bottles, bundles of tangled straw, and all the refuse that accumulates round ships at anchor by the dockside. Whistles were then heard, and bells, and the whole frame of the boat began to vibrate with the rhythmic pulse of the engines.

'Mano,' suddenly called Vidame, 'go and see what's become of Suzanne. It's quite some time since I saw her.'

'I saw her,' said Farge. 'But that was in the taxi. Since then I'm not at all sure.'

'I'll go and see,' volunteered Emmanuel des Combes.

'She 'll be in her cabin. She doesn't much like the sea. No doubt she's going to unpack while things are fairly quiet.'

'Yes, go at once, old man'

The boat was now gliding down the middle of the river. One could see the houses, the towers, and the warehouses of the town. Drops of rain still spattered in the gusts of the north-wester. Des Combes was soon back. He had not been able to find Suzanne. The cabin door was locked. He had knocked hard but no one had answered.

'I'll go and look for her myself,' said Hellouin. 'Where do you think she's likely to be? I thought she was looking awful—there's no other word for it—in the dining-car. That's not a bit like her. There must be something the matter.'

'Hellouin, you've got to find her,' said Vidame. 'Buck up, old thing. You can imagine what a mess there'll be if Suzanne has been left behind. Just suppose that she's gone on shore again. You never can tell with a woman. A letter to post, something to buy, some whim that sends her careering off at the last moment. I can't be everlastingly chasing around like a sheep dog, or a prison warder, or a detective.'

Hellouin was already off; Vidame remained, shaking his head ill-humouredly and sucking at his pipe.

Less than a minute later Hellouin returned. He had spotted Suzanne. She had gone and hidden herself in the stern of the boat, in the second-class quarters. She wasn't ill but was crying a little. Vidame shrugged his shoulders.

'Go and tell her,' he said, 'that she'd better come and dine with the others. We shall still be a little while in the river and she'll be able to feed in comfort. Afterwards, there's no telling. There's a stiff wind blowing.'

Suzanne was in fact sitting all by herself on a deserted lower deck in the stern of the boat. She was gazing disconsolately at the town and the stone quay where a little crowd still lingered. Those waving handkerchiefs were not for Suzanne. She had her associates. Always and everywhere she had plenty of associates. But she had no friends. No, she just

looked at the town, the handkerchief-waving crowd, because you must look at something as long as your eyes are open.

But now some talkative groups of passengers had come up to Suzanne. With outstretched arms they pointed to buildings and warehouses on the shore. They were making a good deal of noise. So Suzanne got up and went back to the first-class deck and started to thread the labyrinthine ways of this unknown vessel. She breathed with disgust a smell of warm oil which she knew only too well, the smell of engines at sea.

Now one caught a glimpse in the rainy twilight of the countryside and its vineyards. The actors, gathered round their chief, mentioned famous names and in solemn anticipation clicked their tongues against their palates. Vidame seemed out of temper. He said:

'I'm going to choose the table at which we can all be together. Unless of course, the captain . . . Hellouin, go and see Suzanne. She must be in her cabin by now. Tell her, old man, not to put on a long dress to-night. Nobody dresses for dinner on the first night.'

Hellouin disappeared into the bowels of the vessel. He returned almost immediately. Suzanne was in her cabin, stretched on her bunk, her face buried in her handkerchief. She was weeping heavily. She hadn't even replied when he delivered his message.

'Suzanne is silly,' said Eric Vidame, 'to give way like that. You can tell her from me, the next time you see her, that all these tears are just absurd. She'll spoil her complexion. Oh! don't go back at once. There's no hurry after all, we shall be on this old tub for something like eighteen or twenty days. There'll be plenty of time to shake down.'

Suzanne lay in the little cabin which, by a special favour, she would have to herself for the length of the voyage. She was stretched out on the narrow bunk. She had suddenly become like one of those glittering birds whose flight and plumage fill an aviary with life and colour, but who, when touched by sleep or death, are no longer any more than a

pinch of feathers and dust in a corner. It seemed to her all of a sudden that the ship, grasped by some unseen power, was being pulled from under her body and that she was about to fall headlong into nothingness. The beat of the engines was now merciless. And those engines were talking, as it is said they do in the dead of night when human beings are asleep. And they were repeating endlessly in that monotonous voice of theirs: 'Su-zanne-has-wast-ed-her-life. . . . Su-zanne-has-wast-ed-her-life. . . . Su-zanne-has-wast-ed-her-life. . . .'

Night must by now have fallen on all the French countryside as on the empty sea. Suzanne suddenly saw in her mind's eye the house on the hill-top, the dismayed faces, and that great child Hubert whom she had held in her arms, and for whom, when she slipped away at dawn, she had left a letter four lines long, a wretched scrap of paper half the size of the palm of her hand. No, not a letter; a cry. A cry of despair and farewell.

The engines were now singing a different song. They said, they whispered to the lulling accompaniment of the waves, words of strange import: 'How beautiful looks scorn on his contemptuous lip. . . . How beautiful looks scorn on his contemptuous lip. . . .' Alas, alas! no one had ever scorned Suzanne. It was she who had scorned to live a life of reality. She was now doomed to dwell among shadows. Would she be Olivia, Lucinde, or Célimène? No, no. She was now, alas, merely a creature without joy, without light, without hope, but not without regrets; assuredly not without regrets.

She tried again to imagine the house on the hill-top and the scent of the honeysuckle. But it needs a rich spiritual endowment to imagine scents. She had no such endowment. She was merely a suffering soul. Even in this depth of her misery she felt herself assailed, mastered, uplifted by a terrible reality which transcended her in every way, and which was not Suzanne but the sorrow of Suzanne.

The door of her cabin opened once more and fat Helloun showed his puffy face.

There he stood, at the foot of her bunk, making heroic

efforts to keep upright against the lurching of the ship. It was as much as he could do. Between two rolls he gave her some confused information. They would soon be in mid ocean. The lights of Cap de la Coubre and of Cap de Grave would be visible. There was a good deal of wind and the sea was rough. The *patron* advised Suzanne to remain quietly in bed, since she was feeling so rotten.

On the advice of Charruel, Suzanne had taken an atropine tablet at starting. Her throat was dry, and she looked at the fat actor through eyes that were no longer blue, but black and clouded with anxiety. As he closed the door Hellouin repeated once more: 'Just try and get some sleep.'

Suzanne gave a long sigh and did not even answer. The turmoil of the sea offered her a nauseating refuge.

THE PASSION OF JOSEPH PASQUIER

I

It was over the nature and the arresting quality of the red that the eye hesitated first of all. It was not carmine and certainly not vermillion. It was not, and couldn't be, madder or cochineal. There was a touch of ochre in it, and a soupçon of kermes, with something brighter and yet somewhat subdued. Well then, was it possibly cinnabar? That was it, no doubt about it, cinnabar.

This first certainty established, the mind was ready to encounter the surprises of an inventory. One could not fail to notice what appeared to be a black crosier furnished with pegs and strings: it was the scroll of a viol or lute. Not far away there was an eye, limpid and magnificent, with long curling lashes. It opened in a halo the colour of ripe medlars. What a rich colour! On the iris of this eye could be seen the reflection, curved and distinct, of a latticed window. Then one encountered two or three squares of the kind of parquet known as 'Versailles.' Then a hand, a slender, beautifully moulded hand. Then, not far from the hand, a torn piece of newsprint on which could be read: '*La Presse*, journal du soir, sixième édition.' Then an antique buskin and a tortoise-shell comb. It was above the comb that the observer noted a lion's paw. A truly royal paw, all its claws out. After that, in order to reach the crocodile's snout and the antelope's horn, one had to go quite a long way, to the very edge of that desert of cinnabar, in a wild waste where three lumps of crystal twinkled like lighthouses; one could not make out if they were merely glued or actually riveted to the panel. Or possibly embedded in the paint? Oh, no, no such thing. No impasto here. The whole picture had been treated with washes, or rather glazes, lightly laid on and perfectly transparent. Now, having reached the extreme edge of the cinnabar, the befuddled eye lost its balance for a moment

A second later it attempted to fasten on the jaw of a panther, or was it a puma? a jaw delicately interposed between two leaflets of the Society for the Protection of Animals. But both mind and eye, irresistibly attracted by the lure of the cinnabar, plunged without delay into that glowing expanse.

'Well?' said Joseph in a hoarse voice, on a note of concern tinged with curiosity. 'Well?'

'Well,' replied M. du Thillot, 'I think it's very pleasing in movement, very lovely in colour, but I must say it's rather beyond me. In fact, I don't understand it very well, at least not all of it. Oh, the details, of course . . . the details are simply perfect. One recognizes the brush of a master. I already possess some pictures by Gretchenko painted at the time when he was looked upon as merely one of the Fauvists. Canvases of his amaranthine period. But this, this! I must confess I don't go so far as this.'

Joseph stepped back a pace or two, screwed up his eyes several times, and moved his thumb about as if he were moulding voluptuous curves in the air, then he turned to M. du Thillot with a shrug of his shoulders and said:

'Yes, yes, I see how it is. you haven't yet got beyond Bonnard and Vuillard, perhaps not even so far: Cézanne? Renoir? Monet? Oh, there's nothing to be ashamed of in that. I too have some Cézannes. And Monets, a score of them. As many here as I have at Butry. And Renoirs. And some by Degas. My dear Monsieur du Thillot, you are wise, you go in for sound investments.'

'Investments! investments!' grunted the little old man, shaking his head with some dignity. 'I sincerely love good painting, but I must admit that I need to grasp the general idea, the general feeling. I'm on to Cézanne all right, I can assure you. As for Gretchenko, or at least, this particular Gretchenko, well, it rather puts me off.'

Joseph Pasquier waved an arm towards the wall and said rather irritably:

'It's an Orpheus. The most beautiful figure of Orpheus you could possibly find in three centuries of painting. My

brother Laurent—you know, the great savant—made some very interesting comments on the jaw of the puma, particularly its teeth, and also those of the crocodile. Apart from that, Laurent doesn't understand it in the least, any more than you do, dear Monsieur du Thillot. Confess, no more than you do. Well now, just another five minutes, as you're interested.'

'Yes,' said the old gentleman, 'I know you're very busy'

'Terribly busy! More rushed than I can say. But, hang it all, I too am devoted to pictures. As you are not taken by the Gretchenko, come along here, into the long gallery. Cézannes, you were speaking of Cézannes? Well, here are half a dozen. The bathers on the Montagne de la Victoire, well, as you see, I'm the man who owns them. Weren't you aware of that? And yet when I bought the picture there was a long screed about it in the *Illustration*. And that Renoir you see over there, that nude woman making a simultaneous display of her pink bottom and her formidable jaw, I can tell you I didn't get that for a song. Rather not. I had to give thirty thousand for that Renoir, but to-day it's worth at least eighty thousand. And the way things are going, by next year it will possibly have passed the hundred and fifty thousand mark. It is merely a matter of exchange at the moment. Price of gold.'

The little old man threw his hands up in some alarm. Joseph shrugged and went on:

'It's dreadful, of course, but that's how things are. The rest of my collection I'll show you in detail some other time. This is my pleasure, my relaxation. . . . Now to come back to Fourdillat, I'm not, like you, one of his circle. I only see him at the Chamber, and I certainly don't wish to ask any favour of him as man to man. As far as outward appearances go, I don't wish to be mixed up in the matter. Fourdillat is a most respectable Minister of National Economy. . . . Yes. . . . I think, Monsieur du Thillot, that it's clear we are in agreement.'

'We are quite agreed,' replied the old gentleman, elevating

his eyebrows above his old-fashioned pince-nez. 'We are agreed on the main lines. You want an increase in your quota of something like fifty tons . . .'

'No!' interrupted Joseph Pasquier roughly. 'That's nothing like it.'

He stopped pacing along the picture-covered wall. He began thinking. To do so under the best conditions, he suddenly stood as if petrified, with his head held rigid and his eyes staring into vacancy. His fists were tightly clenched, his legs slightly apart, somewhat as sentinels stand in old engravings. Joseph was not tall, but he was of burly build. With his thick dray-horse neck, his strong limbs, his muscular chest, his eye ever on the move, he made one think of some powerful and intelligent animal. He had heavy features, long, distinctly marked wrinkles; his reddish pink countenance was as it were stretched over vigorous tendons. The lobes of his ears had in recent years taken on a purplish hue, as did his cheeks and brow when Joseph gave way to temper, which was at least once if not several times a day. His face was clean shaven. Bushy eyebrows and grey, almost white hair showed up conspicuously against the red complexion. Sometimes Joseph opened his mouth to laugh or speak, and then one saw two splendid rows of teeth with here and there a glint of gold. Every few moments he would tug out of a snake-skin case an enormous pair of spectacles which he would plant on his nose with quick fingers adorned with thick tufts of hair. One guessed that under its sumptuous linen his chest would be as hairy as that of a grizzly bear. Everything in this bulky frame suggested balance and masterfulness. An occasional twitching might catch the attention of a close observer: for when Joseph spoke too excitedly his mouth would twist spasmodically, and the left corner, with two or three rapid jerks, seemed to sink into the fullness of the cheeks.

He looked down at little M. du Thillot with a grimace of mingled compassion and mockery, which seemed to signify: 'No, no. You needn't be afraid. I'm not going to sneeze,

I'm not going to breathe too hard. I haven't the least wish to make you jump. And if I should happen to take you by the arm or put my hand on your shoulder, I shall do so quite gently. There are *bibelots* in my glass cases. I know how to handle them. There's nothing to worry about.

'No, no, we're not agreed, my dear Monsieur du Thillot,' he went on in a booming, slightly husky voice. 'Just listen to me a moment. The Cryogen Company, of which I am the managing director, imports refrigerators from America in three different sizes: small, medium, and large. You notice I mention a small size; our undertaking is essentially democratic and wishes to put this marvellous modern invention at the disposal of every household. Right! Our annual import quota is three hundred tons. And what I want to know is why we are restricted at all when there isn't a single company in France capable of giving what we give at the same price and of the same quality. Right! We are in the month of May and the quota is already used up. We haven't the least desire to stop our importation, and our American correspondents are urging us to find a way out of this absurd situation. At this very moment I have a hundred tons of cryogen held up at Saint-Nazaire. What do you think of that? And in another week there'll be another hundred tons of goods on their way across the Atlantic. Right!'

'But in the first instance you mentioned fifty tons, possibly sixty,' protested the little old man.

'Did I say that? Surely not! . . . Well, if I did, it was a slip. It's two hundred tons for August-September, and probably three hundred before the end of the summer. It's in the summer, you see, that the blighters want to make their ices and preserve their food. Now what I ask of you for the moment, Monsieur du Thillot, is to get on the track of Fourdillat, to sniff him out, to let me know as quickly as you can, my dear friend, what he's hiding in that worthy Auvergnat noddle of his, to find me, to find us, a dodge for wangling some kind of agreement with him, and in such a way that everybody's satisfied. Fourdillat, of course, in the

first place. Honour where honour is due. Then myself, and the company, and the Americans, of course'—he pronounced it 'Amricains' 'And then you, Monsieur du Thillot. You know me, I think, Monsieur du Thillot.'

The old man raised his hand, gave a cough, and said:

'Oh, me, me! I'm not worried. But now don't run away with the idea that Fourdillat would dream of accepting money. He's particularly touchy on that subject'

Joseph stamped on the echoing parquet.

'But who has said anything about money? I quite believe you when you say that Fourdillat is over-scrupulous. That's just the reason why, in order to please him, we must hit on some really clever dodge, something which a conscientious man can accept with both hands and with his eyes shut. Money! Money! It's really extraordinary! All these blighters, my dear friend, pretend to talk of money with tremendous contempt, almost amounting to disgust. But I ask you, with what else do they pay for their eggs and bacon and orange marmalade? Tell me that. With what else do they buy their silk shirts and beaver coats? With smiles, do you think? With a few honeyed phrases, perhaps? No, not a bit of it. They all, every one of them, need money; and they all long to have pots of money. They all get hold of money and they are all beastly stingy with their blasted money. And what's more, they are thinking of money from morning till night, and even from night till morning. Only they won't admit it, and I'm the only man in the world who is not a hypocrite on the subject of money. And if they don't happen to be stingy on their own account, they are stingy on behalf of their company or their charitable funds for the poor. Yes, for the poor! You never knew Alfred Varlot, who managed the wood pulp company. He lived like a dog. He handled millions and worked like a galley slave to save the company five francs. You never knew the Abbé Zeller, of Sainte-Clotilde? No? Oh, a saint, Monsieur du Thillot. A model of poverty. A moth-eaten cassock and beetle-crushers like colanders, kept together with string. He used to give away

everything to his poor. But so as to be able to give away everything he thought of nothing but money. He held the record for stinginess. He would have played any mean or unscrupulous trick just to be able to get hold of more for his poor. In fact, he did several shady things and very nearly got pinched. If he wasn't pinched it was because I took a hand. Priests in my eyes are sacred. I've no religion, it's true, but I won't have a finger laid on the priests. . . . Yes, as I was saying: money! Oh, Lord, I could tell you such a lot . . . but I prefer to say no more about it. As for Fourdillat, naturally we shall safeguard his delicacy, and that, my dear Monsieur du Thillot, is exactly why I and the Cryogen Company are invoking your powers of invention and your ready tact.—What is it you want, young Blaise?

A young man had just appeared at the far end of the gallery. He was dressed in a long, tight-waisted morning coat and pin-stripe trousers. Tucked under his arm he carried a pigskin portfolio. His cheeks were dusted with powder. An almost imperceptible smile hovered on his finely chiselled lips.

'What do you want, young Blaise?' repeated Joseph Pasquier in a friendly, casual tone.

'Monsieur le Président,' replied the young man distinctly, 'it's Monsieur de Janville on the telephone.'

'Ah, yes, yes!' exclaimed Joseph, suddenly attentive, even eager. 'But why didn't you put him through to me in the gallery? You don't suppose I'm going to trudge downstairs. And if I've installed telephones in every room it's certainly not just for fun.'

Without replying the young man went towards a small closet camouflaged among the pictures. He opened it and, standing aside, murmured in colourless, almost icy tones:

'Here is the connection for monsieur le Président.'

Joseph leapt to the receiver, his bushy white eyebrows twitching, his broad face expressing something quite unusual for him, a sort of obsequious jubilation. He positively cooed in his endeavour to impart a soft velvety quality to his powerful voice:

'How are you, my dear marquis? And how is Madame de Janville?'

Little old M. du Thillot turned towards the young man in the well-cut morning coat. In friendly fashion, endeavouring meanwhile with thumb and forefinger to adjust a precariously balanced pince-nez, he whispered:

'Just now I heard you call M. Pasquier monsieur le Président. Are you also a member of our society, "The Friends of the Plastic Arts"?''

'No,' replied the young man coldly. 'M. Joseph Pasquier is at the present time president of nineteen different societies and vice-president of four others. M. Pasquier only accepts a vice-presidency when it is looked upon as obligatory in preparation for the presidential chair.'

'I hardly know how to thank you,' President Pasquier was meanwhile murmuring with his head in the telephone closet. 'The thought that M. Pierquin and M. de Praz could possibly vote for me, and the thought that they have been good enough to read my books, and above all the thought that it is to you that I shall owe these two exceptionally important voters, this thought, my dear marquis, overwhelms me with mingled confusion and gratitude. Well, then, I shall see you on Wednesday at the Argolides' lunch. . . . I don't know how to thank you.'

M. du Thillot's eyes were blinking gently behind the lenses of his pince-nez, on which the prints of greasy fingers could be clearly seen.

'If I may be allowed to say so,' he confided softly, 'I gather that M. Joseph Pasquier is busy nursing his candidature?'

'Most carefully,' agreed the young man with an arctic smile. 'In any case, monsieur le Président has not yet announced that he is going to stand. There is nothing official yet, but when he does . . . !'

The young man's head went slowly up and down in a manner expressive of conviction and devoted confidence.

'Certainly,' purred Joseph Pasquier from the depths of his cubby-hole, 'I'll bear it in mind. I have a great esteem

for M. Peuch, but I shouldn't have thought that from the point of view of influence . . . He has received my two books, that goes without saying. And with a complimentary inscription from the author, in view of . . . Well, I'll bear it in mind, I'll think of something. Please give my devoted regards, my dear friend, to madame la Marquise. And again my most heartfelt thanks.'

Joseph emerged from the closet, flinging back the door. After being so long in the dark he looked like a sleeper suddenly torn from his slumbers. In a voice full of irritation he called out:

'Blaise! Blaise! Where on earth has he got to? He's never to be found where I want him, that young man!'

He reopened the closet door and again took down the receiver, which was still warm. 'Find M. Delmuter,' he bawled angrily. 'He can't have gone far. He was in the long gallery only two minutes ago. Send him to me straight away.'

'That young gentleman is your secretary, I presume,' murmured M. du Thillot.

Joseph Pasquier's flushed face emerged once more from the closet.

'He is one of my secretaries. And if he behaves himself, he may some day soon be appointed chief of my secretariat.'

Mr. du Thillot laughed softly.

'I suppose we might say your chief of staff, monsieur le Président.'

Joseph cast a suspicious glance in the direction of the old man. He snorted two or three times like a horse, and then answered stully:

'No! Not my chief of staff. Chief on the social side. You know he began by taking science at the Polytechnique, but he couldn't keep it up from want of money. You see, as I was saying, it's always a question of money. He was looking for a social position. And when I found him he was almost down and out. You hear me, down and out. And he's of a good family: his father, who is dead, had the rank of minister

plenipotentiary or even ambassador. A young fellow of that age, a mere lad of five-and-twenty, if he doesn't feel the hand of an employer or a chief behind him, what the devil will happen to him? He has appreciated what I have done for him. He is devoted to me. Yes, he's certainly that. He owes me everything, and, wonderful to relate, he's actually grateful.'

Then suddenly lowering his voice, Joseph said with a peculiar smile:

'That morning coat? What do you think of that morning coat? It was my idea. I am the only one to insist on a morning coat. It makes a terrific effect. I picked up the idea three years ago now, at the funeral of Duchamp-Beaufils. I had gone to pay my respects to the dead, to indulge in devout meditation, as Barthou, who had taken me in his carriage, expressed it. At each of the four corners of the coffin there stood an embassy attaché. And every one of the four was wearing a morning coat and striped trousers! According to what I was told by Barthou, who was on thee-and-thou, waistcoat-prodding terms with them all—at ordinary times, of course, not in the mortuary chapel—well, according to him, every one of them was either a duke or a count. Hand-picked, the lot of them. And that's why, here at my place, the first secretary wears a morning coat. And every day, mind you! I insist on that, from nine in the morning to seven in the evening. Elegant! Distinguished!'

Joseph lowered his voice as the young man came in with his portfolio under his arm, looking calm and aloof.

'Why had you disappeared, young Blaise?'

'I have not yet informed you, monsieur le Président, that there is a deputation from the ninth arrondissement in the waiting-room. It's the fruiterers. Monsieur le Président will remember: that business of the stallage and the police regulations.'

'Damn!' growled Joseph. 'I'd clean forgotten those people. That's what comes of talking art! Listen, young Blaise: I'll see them presently, on my way out, for I shall be

going off as soon as M. Obregon arrives. It's already gone five. Now listen, young Blaise, I want you to go down to the store-room and speak to the chef. He's got two baskets of strawberries down there. Now, careful. Hot-house strawberries. Marvellous! Miraculous! On each of the baskets there is a label addressed to M. Laurent, my brother. First thing to do is to take off the labels. And as soon as I've gone you'll take the small car and you'll go yourself and leave one of the baskets, with my card, for M. Pierquin, Membre de l'Institut. Be sure you put "Membre de l'Institut" M. Pierquin, boulevard Raspail, you get me? With my card and some polite phrase that you'll write yourself, imitating my hand. The other basket to be delivered to M. Peuch, rue Cassette. Mairesse-Miral can take it. Mairesse will go by métro, unless you can drop him at the rue du Vieux-Colombier, which would be a saving. Yes, yes, I know all about that: Mairesse is bleary-eyed, and there's egg on his waistcoat. And he smells to heaven, he stinks of rabbit, or worse, badger. But if M. Peuch happens to come across him, well, it won't matter. Old Peuch stinks too. I was next to him the other day in church, on New Year's Eve. And old Peuch, too, has his menu recorded on his waistcoat. But with him it isn't eggs. He can't eat them, on account of his liver. It's *sauce béchamel* or some filth of that kind. But you'll see to all that after I've gone. I'm off at once, I ought to have gone long ago.'

The young man was just about to disappear when Joseph stopped him with a mighty bellow.

'Telephone at once to the insurance broker Ask for Luterod and tell him that to-night I'm taking to Butry two Matisses, 'Woman with Zebra' and the 'Birth of Spring,' my big Fantin-Latour, the portrait of Pelletan, and the Toulouse-Lautrec of the Bal Tabarin. I must be covered from six-thirty for six hundred thousand, and that will be up to Saturday morning. For Butry, and for the road journey. After that, I shall bring the lot back here before leaving for London. And tell him to send me a *pneu* to reach me without

fail this evening. You, will open the *pneu* and then telephone to me.'

After a brief but respectful nod of assent the young man went out of the door. Joseph came back to M. du Thillot with such a rush that the old man nimbly executed a dexterous twist of the loins, comparable to that of the torero avoiding the horns of the bull, the movement known to specialists as the *quebro*

'You can well understand,' said Joseph, laughing fit to split his sides, 'you can well understand that after that business of La Pâquellerie I'm on my guard with the insurance people. When La Pâquellerie was burnt down, two years before the war, in the spring of 1912, I had taken down for the holidays, for my own pleasure, a Courbet, a perfect beauty, a glorious little picture that used to belong to Levêque, Urbain Levêque, the former vice-president of the Chambou, from whom I had bought it. An absolute beauty. It was burnt with the rest of the things. And to get them to pay the additional sum of fifty thousand francs that the picture was worth, I had to go to law with the blasted company for more than six years. Here, Monsieur du Thillot, just look at this Odilon Redon. I nabbed it from the Dutch at the Debruyker sale. Take a quick look, because I'm frightfully rushed. Blaise! Where's Blaise? Gone off again.' Here Joseph gave two or three shouts which shook the house to its foundations. But the young man had certainly gone. Shrugging his shoulders he turned towards the line of pictures.

'You must admit,' he said, gloating, 'really you must admit that for mystery, it goes beyond everything: all that grey, all that black, with that ray of light falling as it were from an air-shaft, and, in the middle, that poppy. For flowers Odilon Redon has no equal. What taste, Monsieur du Thillot! You can't get away from it. If you want Odilon Redons nowadays you must go and look for them in Holland. As for me, I've already four to go on with. And now I really must be off. Here in this gallery I forget everything, even the most important matters. As for Fourdillat, you understand? Well

then, I'll give you a week. Not a day longer. We'll speak about it again on Wednesday before I leave for London. Between now and then, go and see people, Monsieur du Thillot, look round you and make inquiries and hunt for an inspiration. And then we'll arrange matters so that every one is satisfied. You know what I mean. Good business is when every one is satisfied. And now what is it you want, Blaise? I never can find you when I've something to say to you, and you're always at hand when I no longer need you'

'Monsieur le Président,' said the young man in his clear-cut tones, 'Señor Obregon has just telephoned that he'll be here in five minutes. He is leaving the legation and coming straight along. And then there are those fruiterers. They're beginning to stampede. And then there are your proofs which the printers have just delivered.'

'You can correct them, and, Blaise, you can give me one set which I'll take down with me to the country. Correct it carefully.'

'And then . . .' the young man began again.

Joseph whipped round on him and emitted a strange sound not unlike the growl of one of the cat tribe as it crouches glaring at its prey.

'And then?' he repeated in a furious voice.

'And then,' coldly continued the young man in the morning coat, 'and then there's M. Sanasoff.'

'Of course, of course,' groaned Joseph 'That puts the lid on it. Of course we'd have to have Sanasoff. Good-bye, Monsieur du Thillot; I do most earnestly request you to have everything ready by Wednesday, to find a dodge, a neat solution. And see that I don't have to take a hand. I'm sorry I can't go down with you. I just can't; my house is full of cursed bores, spongers, and gate-crashers. I'm a prisoner in my own house because of all these blasted bores. Wednesday, then! The hall's at the bottom of the stairs, straight ahead. Now, young Blaise, come here, I want to speak to you'

The old gentleman had hardly got out of the room when Joseph unceremoniously slammed the door behind him.

'I'm just off, Blaise. Look after those proofs carefully, because, as a matter of fact, I may not have time to look through them myself. Now if you really don't mind, my boy, I'm going to call you Blaise. After trying hard for six months I still can't get used to your surname. It doesn't come to me; I can't get it out. Delmuter, yes, I know it's a very good name, but really it can't matter to you . . .'

Joseph stopped, already preoccupied with some other idea.

'Allow me to say, monsieur le President, that I regret it,' protested the young man.

'Oh, come! you'll get used to it! How old are you, my boy?' continued Joseph, lowering his head and looking to right and left and back again in the manner of a man who is not paying any attention to what he is saying.

'I'm turned twenty-five, monsieur le Président.'

'Yes, I know I've already asked you a dozen times or more, and I shall go on asking you a hundred times, and meanwhile you'll have got to be twenty-six and so I shall never get it straight. That's how it is between friends. Look here, wasn't there some celebrated man called Blaise?'

'Yes, Pascal, monsieur le President.'

'Yes, I think I shall go on calling you Blaise. I think it sounds better and in any case it's easier. Let me make it clear that it's not just casual familiarity, it's friendly interest. Ah, did you hear the courtyard bell? That's sure to be Obregon. I'll be down in a moment. Put him into the car. I really must go and wash my hands! I'll pick up my overcoat in the cloakroom and as I go by I'll just say a few words to those fruiterers. They are voters. Oh, and before going to Pierquin, with those strawberries, you know, I want you to telephone to the Galerie Paufigue and say that I'm keeping it. . . . It's a picture I'm referring to, that lovely little Derain which is at present in my bedroom. I'm going to keep it. Then you must also telephone to Virgelin's and tell them that I've tasted the mirabelle. I want two quarter-casks at least, one for here and another for Butry. If M. Ravier-Gaufré calls up before to-morrow, you can tell him I'm at Butry with

M. Obregon and that we are working like niggers. And now, that's everything.'

'Monsieur le Président.'

'Eh? What?'

'You've forgotten M. Sanasoff. He's just outside the cloakroom. You won't be able to avoid seeing him.'

Joseph raised two clenched fists towards heaven, fists like sledge-hammers.

'You can see him and fling him the *mot de Cambonne*, with a few others of the same kind and of the same stink, if possible. My poor Blaise, I don't believe you realize what Serge Sanasoff is. Never, never, do you hear me? has any one been able to plague me to such an extent as Sanasoff! I detest bores, and he is the bore of bores. I detest beggars, spongers, slobberers, and muddlers, and Sanasoff is all those rolled into one. And the queer thing about it is that he always manages to get something out of me. On that account I have a sort of sneaking regard for him. I ought to have chucked him out at least four years ago, once and for all with a good kick in the pants. You'll go downstairs before me, and while you're talking to him edge him away to the far end of the library. In the meantime I shall hop it. Damn! There's the telephone again!'

'But,' murmured Blaise Delmuter, 'M. Sanasoff said that he was bringing you by hand a book by M. Saumade of the Sciences Morales et Politiques, one of his own personal friends.'

'Yes,' grumbled Joseph as he made for the stairs. 'I shall have to see him for a minute after all. Once again he's got me! It's most amazing, he always gets me in the end. Now first of all go and stick Obregon in the car. As to the phone, let it ring. And then tell those fruiterers that I'm coming. This is no sort of life. It's a perpetual catastrophe. It's the treadmill! It's hell! Come, off with you, my boy.'

A second later Joseph Pasquier burst into the bathroom like a wild bull into the arena. Before him on the light-blue tiles he caught sight of a queer sort of picture, whose details

he made out one by one. In the nuddle that black blob was not the scroll of a viol but the receiver of a telephone. The telephone, his, Joseph's, own particular instrument. Round this object, outlined with horrible distinctness, he could distinguish copies of *L'Information financière*, then a pince-nez, M. du Thillot's own pince-nez with its silk cord. And all round were refrigerators of the 'medium-sized cryogen' model in orderly rows as they appeared in the posters which the French company had just put up in Paris. Then Joseph caught sight of a lion's paw which he immediately recognized: bent back, with its claws unsheathed, it was the paw of one of the lions guarding the entrance of the Institut, facing the pont des Arts. After this he noticed a basket of strawberries, and, oddly enough, just above it a morning coat of elegant cut. He also saw M. Mairesse-Miral's waistcoat, a flowered velvet waistcoat on which drops of sauce and smudges of egg yolk were drying. Then the brass plate that adorned the door of Fernand Luteiod, insurance broker. Then, further on, a bronze-coloured smear which no doubt represented the sallow face of Señor Hernando Obregon. Then all of a sudden, like a boundless expanse of azure ocean without a sail or smoke-stack, the pale-blue tiling stretched out to infinity.

How could one define that evanescent blue? For it wasn't a pure blue. And it wasn't cobalt. It was much paler, much colder, much more delicate than cobalt. How about lapis? No, not at all, and certainly not the slate-blue of *turquin*. It hadn't the innocence of borage, nor the ingenuousness of forget-me-nots, nor the virginal simplicity of veronica. One was rather tempted to think of periwinkle. Suddenly one realized that this blue, this sea of pallescent blue, was just simply the Pasquier blue, it was the very eye of the late Raymond Pasquier, it was that wellnigh colourless blue of the family eye in moments of anger, lassitude, or reverie.

Joseph Pasquier opened a huge mouth and produced a terrific yawn. It ran down the scale like a chromatic solfeggio and ended in a moan.

II

Every time Joseph got into his car and grasped the wheel in his gloved hands, he experienced a feeling comparable with that of the knight who, all rigid in his armour, firmly fixed in his saddle, reins in gauntleted fist, lance in rest, sets out for the conquest of the world along the road of high adventure.

Joseph had had his first car in the early days of the century. Since then he had bought, worn out, smashed up, and resold several dozen of all makes and sizes. Not that that prevented him from talking with regretful longing of the heroic days of motoring and of the time when a driver could go thirty miles on a national high road without meeting a single car. For Joseph, on the subject of pleasures, professed a robust, barbaric philosophy. 'For a pleasure to be genuinely a pleasure,' he would say to himself and often enough declare openly, 'I've got to have it to myself. Or, at least, the number of people who can have it too must be restricted as far as possible. They make me laugh, all these chaps who gas about the needs of the multitude and the democratization of useful inventions! Oh, of course I talk the same sort of slop for the Cryogen and for that old ass of a du Thullot, in the hope that he'll repeat it to Fourdillat, who is a Radical Socialist. But I know better than any one else that such talk is all bosh. The real pleasure and satisfaction in life is to have what the other fellow can't afford. And I know what I'm talking about. All those who say the contrary are hypocrites. Whichever way I turn I see nothing but hypocrites. It's positively revolting.'

So Joseph was ever ready to deplore the streams of cars on the roads. He used to grumble about these brutes who don't know how to drive and yet allow themselves to . . . He openly regretted the days when driving was an art, a science, a sport. 'To-day,' he would say, 'any fool can manage a car. I'm not at all sure that it's an advantage. Oh, yes, I admit that breakdowns are rare nowadays. Well, more's the pity! Yes, more's the pity, up to a point

Because, after all, a breakdown gave you the measure of the driver.' This kind of talk didn't prevent Joseph from foaming at the mouth if by any chance one of his cars behaved freakishly.

Joseph had a chauffeur, and also a footman who could drive. But, nearly always, Joseph drove himself. Handling a car, that monster of power, Joseph felt a thrill which he could hardly disguise. He was skilful yet rough, as in the other actions of his life. Thus he could not conceal when he was at the wheel, because a car has an extraordinary capacity for exaggerating and revealing all our weaknesses. Joseph, for instance, could hardly endure to be passed by any one. He would say: 'I run a Pierlot eight-cylinder and I jolly well know what it costs me. But if I go in for that sort of car it's to be able to do what I want to without interference. Yes, we have to put up with hypocrisy in most places, but, thank heaven, not on the road! There it's figures that count, and nothing else. The ten-horse passes the five-horse, and therefore my twenty-five-horse must inevitably pass the fifteen. In-e-vi-tab-ly. On those lines life is a simple matter. No monkey-tricks. You get your money's worth.'

When he overtook a powerful car, when he cut a difficult corner close, when he approached a long winding hill at high speed, Joseph would grit his teeth, and he then experienced subjectively the illusion of great skill and heroism.

'Don't be afraid,' he said that day, pressing on the accelerator to test its working. 'Don't be afraid, Monsieur Obregon. I've been driving for twenty-two or twenty-five years, I've lost count which, and I've never had what you might call a smash. And then, you know, the chauffeur and the footman are behind. And now let's be off. If I don't go now I shall never get away. There'll always be some blighter to corner me, to delay me and poison the very life of me. You see, Monsieur Obregon, the best thing about a motor is that as long as I'm in it, nobody can reach me. I've cut my moorings. Somebody suggested fitting a wireless telephone in my car. Honestly, I'd rather not have one. No, no, don't

be afraid, don't worry. My brakes are sound and my tyres are new. I know what I'm doing. My eyes are clear and my reflexes perfect. Never any accidents, as I told you. I'd touch wood, but in these new-fangled cars there's no such thing as wood. It's cabinet-work done in steel. So I'll touch steel and it'll count as if it were wood. I'm not superstitious . . .'

'Well, I am,' said Señor Obregon, 'very superstitious.'

'And I'm not in the least,' continued Joseph, 'but nevertheless I've got a St. Christopher medal. My mother gave it to me. I've had it fixed there on the dash-board. I'm not at all superstitious, but St. Christopher's another matter. I tell you once more you needn't be nervous. The engine is perfect. I'm lavish with tyres, I'm lavish with brakes; I know what all that costs me, but I want safety first. It would really be too idiotic if . . . As a rule when I'm in the car I don't talk shop; but this time I'm going to because I'm not satisfied.'

'You're not satisfied?' exclaimed Señor Obregon in his hoarse voice. 'Well, I should like to know why not, Monsieur Pasquier. Oil is not an enterprise like, say, textiles, or a foundry, or our old friend that business of the dam which runs no risk of not functioning. Wherever oil is concerned you are sure to come across . . . what do you call them?—You know, those little hard things in apples . . .'

'Eh? In apples? Oh, pips?'

'Yes, pips. You always come across pips. That's it, pips. But the prospects are splendid. I must remind you, Señor Pasquier, that our Government was not granting any further concessions, nor even the authority to prospect. The Americans and the English were constantly on the spot on the chance of being able to grab something. Our oil belongs to us, and we are firmly resolved to keep it for ourselves, and for our friends, of course. I am well aware that the English and the Americans have excellent charts of the oil fields, excellent channels of information, and so on. They are thoroughly well informed and they're frightfully clever. But Señor

Ravier-Gaufre and I have done Sir Oliver Ellis many a good turn and he can't possibly refuse us anything. So you see, Señor Pasquier, how events play into our hands. And that's how it is that Sir Oliver Ellis gave us a look-in on the Michoacan affair, and only a ten per cent commission to pay him. Now that is the truth, Señor Pasquier.'

Joseph, preoccupied with getting out of Paris through the traffic, wrinkled his nose without answering. Señor Obregon opened his cigar case, chose a cigar, held it out to Joseph, Spanish fashion, between forefinger and thumb, and then set about choosing one for himself. His face was rather fleshy but modelled on strong lines, skin the colour of curry, hair that shone with a sapphire lustre, like the wing-cases of some beetles.

In spite of the characteristically Iberian sonority of his name he must have had some Indian blood in his veins, for, with his thick nose and clumsy ears, he reminded one of those strange disquieting faces one sees carved in relief on pieces of Mayan sculpture. He had the clipped pronunciation of the Spaniards and a deep, rather harsh voice; but he used it well and even with a certain charm. There were times when he endowed that unruly organ with a kind of unctuous suavity.

'It's not our fault,' he went on, 'if the fourth well, the Jean-Pierre, hasn't yielded anything. Ask Rockefeller, ask Deterding and all the others, if one can get oil at every drilling. And after all, what does it matter, one boring more or less? Your lawyer, Señor Alonzo Zaldumbide, and Señor Lopez de Queredo are strictly honourable men. They are my friends, Monsieur Pasquier. And if the Mexican Government has stipulated the boring of at least three wells per annum, that is nobody's fault. That is what is always done. And it's quite reasonable. The fifth well is yielding three hundred and fifty barrels a day. That is perfectly satisfactory. You must have patience, Señor Pasquier. Hey! look out, Señor Pasquier!'

'Nonsense, nonsense!' growled Joseph. 'I've already told

you that I always know what I'm doing. And after all it's only for three-quarters of an hour. You won't have to be nervous for long, Monsieur Obregon.'

'I'm not nervous,' replied the Mexican, 'I'm used to my own car and I don't quite see things the way you do on the road. You should come to Mexico, Señor Pasquier.'

Joseph shrugged his shoulders angrily, but the man of affairs went on in a melting voice suddenly bathed in a sort of tender nostalgia.

'You should come to Mexico and see for yourself what's being done. After all, what does it amount to? No more than two months altogether for the round trip and the visit.'

Joseph's reply came through clenched teeth:

'I can't possibly leave my business affairs for two months just now'

'What a pity, Señor Pasquier! You would see Michoacan, lovely, gentle Michoacan. You would listen to the peasants wrapped in their *serapes* singing *Lindo Michoacan!* Even if there were no question of oil I assure you it's well worth the journey. You would taste the *aguacates*. They're good, delicious—rather like what you call *advocats* or something of the kind. You would see our villages on the islands in the middle of Lake Patzcuaro. There's nothing in the world more beautiful. And the boats with their nets drying as they make their way back to the islands! They remind one of . . . how do you say? dragon-flies, *libellulas*. Ah, come! just this time, Señor Pasquier . . .'

'If you don't mind,' growled Joseph, 'please call me Monsieur Joseph Pasquier. Don't omit the Christian name. You see, I have brothers, two brothers, one of whom is already well known. And sometimes our names get mixed up in the newspapers, where of course they never know a thing, and you've no idea how it exasperates me.'

'You who are a connoisseur of painting,' the Mexican imperiously continued, 'would see the beautiful frescoes of our great Diego Rivera. He may be something of a Communist. But that doesn't really matter. He's a genius

And I am well aware, Señor Joseph Pasquier, that you are one of the ablest connoisseurs of painting in Europe.'

Joseph bridled up in silence. After a moment or two he murmured:

'You can readily understand that I haven't the least intention of crashing with you, Monsieur Obregon, when I tell you that I have at least six hundred thousand francs' worth of pictures in the boot of the car. Yes, in that big case at the back. So you see . . . But I know the road, I know my nerves, and I know my engine. We are spinning along at a hundred and five, that is to say, quite quietly. Would you like me to stop within twenty-five metres, and that without fuss, without a skid, without a bump, and without screwing myself round or even twisting my behind? Would you like me to?'

'Quite unnecessary, Señor Joseph, quite unnecessary.'

'Joseph Pasquier! I must have both my surname and my Christian name. Now listen to me, Monsieur Obregon. We'll go to work after dinner and together we'll concoct the letter for the lawyer. No more of that for the present; we're having the afternoon off. This Michoacan business is certainly not going to make me lose any sleep. I never allow business to interfere with my sleep. I'll just point out that I know what I'm about and I'm getting rather fed up. The Hélène well has yielded nothing but salt water. And you seem to accept that as normal.'

'Nobody's to blame.'

'Really?' mocked Joseph, clapping his foot angrily on the accelerator, which immediately started the car humming. 'Really? Well, we'll go into that and I'll show you my figures. We're nearly there, Monsieur Obregon. It's quite a short trip. There are people who get quite away from Paris. But on account of my business I've always had to stay close at hand. Now look, you see that big house among the trees on the opposite bank of the Oise; well, that's Montredon. That's where we're going and we'll be there within the next five minutes. I've got another house in the

district, at Nesles, four kilometres farther on; but I never stay there and I think I shall probably sell it. Montredon is a gem!

'A gem, Señor Joseph Pasquier. Yes, indeed the brakes are excellent, señor.'

'Yes, excellent. And let me tell you something else, Monsieur Obregon. Look at me, Monsieur Obregon. And just listen to this. I'm fifty-one years of age and I'm in the prime of life.'

'Bravo, Señor Joseph Pasquier!'

'Bravo! and why bravo, may I ask? I'm fifty-one, do you understand? And I've always succeeded in every single thing I've undertaken. Every single thing, little as well as big. And I have no intention of letting the Michoacan change my line of conduct. And now once more, just as a matter of principle, I'm going to touch wood made of steel as there isn't any other kind handy, my dear Monsieur Obregon. Ah! here we are. And we've been spotted, I assure you. I can hear them ringing the bell.'

III

As they leant over the banisters of the broad winding marble staircase, the big tears which fell from Jean-Pierre's eyes dropped into the open space below. There on the stones of the hall they lay like four or five raindrops. Lucien gazed at this display with a disdainful smile.

'Now if it could be of any comfort to you,' he said in a half whisper, 'I'd let you in on something that you don't know, that not a soul here knows, except mother, of course.'

Jean-Pierre raised his head, showing swollen, but still fine eyes that, even though blurred with tears, lit up his narrow boyish face. Lucien went unhurriedly down a stair or two and then leant over towards his brother.

'Well then, if he gets angry again you can remind him that although he's kicking up such a rumpus, he never got it, he never got his *baccalaureat*.'

The boy's face expressed the greatest surprise.

'Oh, but that can't be!' he stammered. 'Why, he knows everything. It's impossible! And then, think of it. He's going to be elected a member of the Institut any day now. Everybody already speaks of it as a certainty.'

Lucien shrugged his shoulders.

'That's nothing to do with it! I tell you, he hasn't got his *bac*. . . .'

'How do you know?'

'I know all about it. I got it out of mother. But don't you ever let on that you know it or I'll give you what for. He hasn't got his *bac* for the very simple reason that he didn't attend secondary school and therefore didn't even try for it. You understand: he wasn't ploughed as you were: he didn't even try for it. But suppose he goes for you too frightfully some day, you just ask him quite innocently how he got through his *bachot*. Wait! Wait, Jeanpi! . . . Here's something else you can say to him.'

'What?' murmured the boy, once more lifting his miserable childish face towards his elder brother.

'You might say, for instance, that the best-known connoisseur of modern painting in France is surely not going to prevent one of his sons from going in for painting when he happens to have a taste for it. You've noticed that father is always praising those famous painters who followed their own genius. He's a dab at appropriating the patter of the experts. Gosh! the stuff he can spill about Cézanne or Van Gogh! Enough to make you split. But you can bet he's quite made up his mind that you're not going to be allowed to paint. That's clear.'

'Well, if he hasn't got his *baccalauréat*,' sighed Jean-Pierre, looking thoroughly wretched, 'what can it matter to him if I go in for painting instead of law. His example shows that one can succeed in everything without it.'

'Pooh!' sneered Lucien in his most contemptuous tones, 'it's just a French superstition.'

As he leant rather too far over the banisters, a lock of his

hair, a great thick lock all sticky with *gomina*, broke away from the rest and fell over his nose. He quickly tossed it back with an irritated gesture and held it firmly in place for a moment with the palm of his hand. He was not quite so tall as Jean-Pierre, and not nearly so thin. His face, with its well-cut features, was pale and rather puffy. He was always looking at it as he went along, in mirrors and window panes. When deprived of such witnesses he would pull a tiny mirror out of his pocket and gaze inquiringly and intently at his image. Although he appeared well covered, almost to the point of plumpness, he was often ill, and for that reason had been exempted from military service. Joseph would sometimes look at him with a sort of angry pity and groan: 'My wife is a fine woman; as for me, I can lift a sack weighing a hundred kilos as neatly as any bloke on the Halles. And we've got three children who've got no blood in their veins and who don't possess what I call a good constitution. Oh, yes, I know I musn't talk about it because Delphine is of marriageable age. But she, too, is stouter than she should be. Good God, how did I come to have such children? It's enough to make one disbelieve in all the laws of breeding. Yes, yes. . . . Well, I hope no one can hear me. What I'm saying is for myself alone'

In spite of his passion for scolding, Joseph took good care not to broach such delicate matters to Lucien. Lucien was very quick and intelligent, in his own fashion, and this particular form of intelligence was something of a threat to his progenitor and caused him some uneasiness.

'Now don't let's stay here,' said Lucien standing up 'First of all, there's a beastly draught, and besides, the servants are listening—yes, I tell you, they're always listening, and I hate it. Look here, Jeanpi, you go the wrong way with father. You don't know in the least how to handle him.'

'Everything goes against me,' declared the lad as he wiped his nose with a childish forefinger. 'It's not only about the painting, and it's not only about the *bacbot*. He's always at me about something or other. There's that well that isn't

yielding. It's no fault of mine that they went and gave it my name, Jean-Pierre. I didn't ask them to. But father took advantage of it to say the beastliest things to me.'

Lucien began to laugh.

'Yes, and the Hélène well yielded nothing but salt water! Mother declared that she didn't care a button, but I think she was rather annoyed all the same. As for the Lucien well, my son, it yields three or four hundred barrels a day. And that's something, I can tell you! What are you listening to?'

'I thought I could hear someone playing.'

'You know it's Déo'

Jean-Pierre's lovely innocent eyes, somewhat too prominent perhaps, began to roll in a manner expressive of pain and anxiety.

'As for me,' declared the elder brother, 'I know how to get round father. I shall have my car in less than a fortnight, a car of my very own! I'm sick of battling with Blaise to get hold of the Citroën for an odd hour or so. I'm sick of weeping on mother's breast to get her to lend me her Renault. Now what'll you bet that I don't have my own car before the end of the month? And not a tin Lizzie, my lad. A three-litre Mignatti, just a two-seater, low-slung, with self-starter, quick pick-up, and everything. You don't know how to get at father's soft spots. And when he begins to storm you immediately get rattled, and then you look like a poor bunny who's just taken the punch. Don't listen, you know very well it's Déo's guita. He's got talent, the blighter. And now—oh, he's ruthless!—now, listen, Jeanpi, it's your fugue. What does it matter to you if he's turned it into a two-step? That's just what's so splendid about your Bach; you can get anything out of him, tangos, charlestons, fox-trots, and what not. Only it takes a chap like Déo to do it'

'Oh,' wailed the boy, genuinely horrified, 'what would Aunt Cécile say?'

'Aunt Cécile? I bet she'd think it quite funny.'

'No, no, that's impossible.'

While he was saying this, Jean-Pierre was leaning over the

well of the stairs in an attitude expressive of anxiety and humiliation.

'Since D  o is there,' his brother went on in the tone of one who has just had a brain-wave, 'you ought to go and ask him.'

'No, no, I don't want to ask him a thing.'

'Why not? Don't put on airs.'

'I'm not putting on airs. He . . .'

'He what?'

'Well he embarrasses me. He makes me blush.'

'Oh, dear! What a sensitive plant!'

'I don't want to ask him anything. Besides, what could I ask him?'

'Well, just simply to do it for you . . . do your beastly translation. He's a *licenci   des lettres*, or something of the sort, perhaps even an *agr  g  *. In any case he's awfully clever. He has a first-class brain even though he does look half crazy.'

'Oh, no, I wouldn't ask him for anything. I just couldn't. But you, Lucien, if you'd give me a hand I'd be so grateful. Really, I'd be awfully glad. But . . .'

'Don't count on me, my lad. I don't know a word of Latin. I remembered all that stuff long enough to scrape through the exam. And then afterwards . . . *psitt* . . . in a few days it had all vanished. No, D  o's the fellow to ask. . . .'

'No,' sighed Jean-Pierre hopelessly. 'No, not I; I'd rather even have rotten marks. We're here for a whole week. So it's bound to get done in the end, this wretched translation. And to think that I'm nearly nineteen! I know it's a disgrace. But why is that man, that Monsieur Ricamus, here again?'

'For a very good reason: he's come to get an interview from father. A whole column in the *Intran*, a column at least. And while he's waiting for his patient, D  odat is doing his stuff at the piano. A sure hit. Let's go for a moment to mother's room, Jeanpi, it'll cheer you up.'

So saying, Lucien seemed to fall into a brown study. Then

he smiled, closed his right eye, twisted his face into an odd grimace that wrinkled his nose, and added:

'What is so admirable about this Ricamus is that he has no respect for anything whatsoever. You get me quite clearly? I've watched him scores of times and in all sorts of ways. He's just aqua-fortis, pure vitriol! He has no respect for anything. Look here, I'm telling you something very special and you're not even listening to me.'

'I'm going off to swot,' mumbled the boy, spreading his arms in a gesture of discouragement. 'No, no, don't try to drag me in, Lucien. No, I refuse to go in; I tell you I dislike him. I dislike him, he just makes me sick.'

'Makes you sick! What a way to talk! He's an ace, this Ricamus, and you don't seem to have a notion of it. All right, then. Go and moulder over your beastly translations. And in spite of everything, for pity's sake don't put on that air of martyrdom. It's rather hard on the family. You might at least give a thought to others.'

The boy went back upstairs, sniffing and dragging his feet in their half-unlaced shoes. Lucien pulled the gold-mounted mirror out of his pocket, consulted it furtively, scratched with a lacquered nail a couple of pimples disfiguring his cheek, adjusted his tie-pin with a precise finger, and took a cigarette with the delicate gesture of an artist putting the final touch to some subtle masterpiece. Then he made his unhurried way to his mother's boudoir.

It was a small room wedged in the south corner of the house looking towards the valley of the Oise. The architect by dint of much panelling had remodelled the available space till at last it had taken the form of an oval casket. There was a baby grand, though Hélène herself never played on it. There was also a citron-wood secretaire, some arm-chairs, and a divan upholstered in *gorge-de-pigeon* damask. Normally the room was well lighted by two windows, one looking west and the other south, but on that evening drawn curtains and the twilight combined to maintain a discreet half-darkness. On the divan there lay a guitar, quite new and furnished with a

shoulder strap of watered silk. The piano, placed in front of one of the windows with its stand covered with sheets of music, made a sort of screen, so that the player was at first hidden from an incoming visitor.

'Who's there?' said Hélène irritably.

She was sitting on a long stool beside the pianist, and she immediately rose with an air of impatience.

Hélène must then have been nearing fifty. She was tall and robust, rather plump, but well held in by a smart tailor-made of masculine cut. Her skirts were short, and her knees were always coming into view; her legs, though somewhat thick, were not without elegance. She still held herself very straight, and by exaggerating the quickness of her movements she endeavoured to hide a tendency to stiffness of the joints. She had just had her fine head of hair cut short and it no longer displayed the golden farness of former days but was of an undecided hue somewhere between brown and tortoiseshell. This new *coiffure*, by displaying the fleshy neck, revealed to the onlooker a part of Hélène's own person which she has never seen and of which she was completely unaware: the nape, white and plump, comparable to a secret thought suddenly exposed to the light of day. When Hélène smiled, a dimple appeared in her right cheek. It was still the charming dimple of other days; but now a multitude of fine wrinkles escaped from it and spread over her face. In any case it was not often that Hélène smiled. She rather preferred to laugh, even loudly, showing her teeth, which were still white and perfect. The bright colouring of Madame Pasquier senior, as some friends of the family called her in spite of her displeasure, had gradually heightened with the years, and when Hélène gave way to irritability she grew very red and could not help feeling uncomfortable about it, which sometimes disfigured her still further.

'Who's there?' she said, springing too hastily away from the piano. 'Oh, it's you, Lu, is it?' she went on in a calmer voice. 'Your friend is in great form to-day. Go on, Déo, or rather, start again. You know, it's quite remarkable.'

The man to whom this compliment was paid emitted a queer sound, which was his one and only way of expressing hilarity: three quick strokes of the glottis—never more than three. This was in the top register—*hé-hé-hé*—and seemed to have no connection with that flowering of the whole being which we call joy. Thereupon he bent over the keyboard and assumed a nasal tone, somewhat like an actor who, to use the theatrical term, is about to ‘announce.’

‘No!’ he exclaimed ‘No, Mamouchka. Main theme, “J’ai envie de fumer.” Get me? Of course, you know I’m just improvising. The main theme is in the style of 1925.’

And suddenly he began to sing in a thin, pleasant voice, accompanying himself on the piano with chords and fanciful decorations:

‘Sous le pont de Tolbiac
L’aube luit, telle une ablette
J’ai ma pipe et mon tabac!
Tout Paris pour une allumette!’

Then he went on without slackening:

‘First variation; listen, Mamouchka. It’s Schubert: *The Fair Maid of the Barge*, words by Duchnocker:

‘Un frais ruisseau turquoise
S’enfuit vers Charenton . . .
Une allumette suédoise
Ferait bien mieux mes oignons.

And now Schumann! Drop a tear, Mamouchka. It cuts me to the heart:

‘Je fume encore, mais j’ai le cœur brisé!

No, you prefer Wagner, Mamouchka? Well then, the incantation over the recalcitrant petrol-lighter:

‘Loge, viens! Viens, je le veux!
Jadis tu brillais sur ce briquet stérile,
Fais jaillir le torrent de tes flammes subtiles,
Et patati et patata
Ich grolle nicht, mehr Licht, mehr Licht!’

Hiccuping, he somehow managed to produce from that mediocre larynx of his a flow of cavernous sonorities, while assailing the keyboard, as it were blindly, with a series of furious punches which by miracle struck the right notes,

making the instrument utter sighs and wails of pain. Then he changed course, appealing to Mélisande and Carmen, declaring with many a sob that 'he was not happy here,' that 'if he were God, he would have mercy on the hearts of men who smoke,' that 'there was yet time to escape with him.' . . . After that he began a lament, still singing and grimacing, to the tune of Boris's farewell, while the bells of the Kremlin echoed in the rosewood case. Then, floating as it were on the torrent of these unrelated noises, came the popular song, *J'ai du bon tabac*. Then this odd clown quitted the piano with an agile leap over the seat. He was short of stature, lively, with eyes of different colours, a foxy nose, and very little hair on his much-dented cranium. He caught hold of the guitar, pushed Mme Pasquier on to the divan, and while she protested, laughing and choking, he began to sing, with one knee on the ground, something which was reminiscent at the same time of Cherubino's aria and of *La Belle Hélène*. Lucien, sprawling in an arm-chair, laughed till he cried. In this wild rigmarole there was something about 'a heart a-sighing' and then something else about 'un roi qui s'avancait bu . . . qui s'avancait bu . . .' The two listeners laughed so heartily that neither the minstrel nor his guitar could be heard.

At that moment the door opened and Joseph Pasquier came into the room with that hurried but heavy step which was his natural walk. Not otherwise would he tread later when in his turn he entered, without slackening, the shadowy portals of eternity.

After a hesitation which certainly did not last more than half a second Déodat Ricamus pivoted on his knee. The ballad to madame ended with a staggering compliment which struck Joseph full in the face, causing his bushy eyebrows to twitch.

'Well, well,' he mumbled vexedly, 'quite charming, isn't it, my dear? Quite charming.'

He was silent for a moment, puzzled and as it were checked in that swift thrust through time and space, that sort of head-

long course which had ever been his way in life. He was silent for a moment and appeared to be thinking. The scene, the divan, the guitar, all this brought back vague memories, and these memories came to disturb him in the midst of his amazing calculations. Meanwhile the musician had thrown down his guitar and come forward, his hand cautiously extended, a sinuous smile on those lips which seemed to belong to an intelligent young animal. And he said in a very gentle voice:

‘Mon cher maître.’

Unfortunately Joseph did not catch this. He was going to take Hélène’s hand, but by accident he caught her by the wrist instead. He did not change his hold, unmannerly though it seemed, and said in an undertone:

‘Just a moment, my dear, I’ve something to say to you.’ He had drawn her into the doorway, where he went on in a low voice: ‘You’re not going to keep him for dinner.’

‘That’s where you’re mistaken,’ replied Hélène coolly. ‘I certainly shan’t let the boy go at this hour. And if I didn’t invite him, Lucien, who is his friend, would do so.’

‘There are some very good trains,’ growled Joseph, ‘and if it comes to the worst I can send him back by car.’

They were using the formal *vous*. Three or four years earlier Joseph had suggested that the familiar *tutoiement* should be discontinued in all intercourse between himself and his wife and even his children. This surprising and belated proposition had been received with satisfaction by all except young Jean-Pierre. Oddly enough, it was Joseph who sometimes failed to conform to the rule of conduct that he himself had laid down.

He continued, on a note of arrogance qualified with embarrassment:

‘I must confess, Hélène, that I don’t like that young man. That’s all, I won’t say any more. In Paris I don’t mind so much. But down here at Montredon! We’re down here for calm and rest. And what is he here for if not to amuse you?’

'Well, that would be something,' replied Hélène calmly. 'But he is here this evening on a matter which concerns you and you only, Joseph. He has been sent down by the *Intransigent* to interview you.'

'Well, he might have said so at once,' snapped Joseph

Although he shrugged his shoulders his face betrayed signs of interest.

'Right,' he said, 'I'll take him along with me. At once, before dinner. And then, after all, we'll keep him as things are so arranged. After dinner I shall be working with Obregon, because, you understand'—here he slipped into the familiar way of speech—'you must understand, my dear, I'm down here for a rest, though it doesn't look much like it. Obregon will be leaving in the car about ten o'clock. Ricamus can go back with him. Right. They'll leave together; that'll take Obregon's mind off the dressing-down he's going to get from me directly.' He bit his upper lip and added something which he said at least twenty times a day, almost without knowing it, in a kind of crazy grumble: 'Two more people! One would think that to you others expense didn't matter.'

Then all at once he turned to the young musician.

'Come along, come along, Ricamus,' he said with sudden cordiality. 'It's much too hot in here. You're still burning logs, Hélène. And the trees are already in leaf. Take a coat, Monsieur Ricamus. We'll go on the terrace. I must get a breath of air. Hurry up, my dear fellow.'

The reply was delivered in a clear and piercing voice that could not fail to reach the ear

'As you wish, mon cher maître.'

This time the artfully chosen expression reached its mark and did not fail of its effect. Joseph's face cleared in a moment

'After all, no,' he said loudly. 'Not on the terrace. You've got to take notes. You'll want a good light and it's already getting dark. We'll go into the library. To begin with, it's quite understood that you mustn't breathe a word about my candidature. You get me, don't you? We can talk of

it later on. For the time being, discretion, tact. No, not a word about the Institut.'

Joseph had taken the arm of the young man with the scanty hair and was leading him masterfully to the stairs.

'We will talk about nothing but painting,' he said. 'My taste for the plastic arts in general and for painting in particular doesn't date from to-day. While still quite young, on my parents' estate, I started a collection of the smaller masters. By the way, Ricamus, next time you are down here I must take you to see the grave of Van Gogh and his brother Théo. Both of them are buried a rifle-shot from here, in the cemetery at Auvers. If you haven't any ink in your fountain-pen, I'll send for some. Mind you say that I am preparing a work on Van Gogh that will be full of startling revelations as well as expert information. . . .'

Hélène and Lucien looked at each other without saying a word. The sound of conversation quickly faded away in the distance.

IV

JOSEPH had declared that by nine-thirty all business matters would be settled, *coûte que coûte*, and that by not later than a quarter to ten he, Joseph, would be in his bed with a pipe loaded with English tobacco in his mouth, spectacles on his nose, and in his hands a nice magazine—flowers, gardens, vegetables, country properties—so as to get to sleep early and dream innocent dreams 'Bucolic dreams,' Ricamus had added.

As ill luck would have it, it didn't seem likely that this attractive time-table could be kept to. At the very beginning of the meal Joseph had become aware that in the rush of leaving, in his haste to escape from bores, he had forgotten at his house in the rue Taitbout a file containing certain papers without which no serious discussion could be undertaken. So he had had a telephone instrument placed on the dinner table,

plugged to the wall with a long loose flex, and while plunging a furious spoon into his soup he had called up Paris. He had got Paris and instructed Blaise Delmutter to take the small car and bring the papers *coûte que coûte* to Montredon. *Coûte que coûte* was a favourite expression of Joseph Pasquier's. This by no means signified a lofty indifference to expense and a willingness to be lavish of it in order to obtain a particular result. No, it meant that Joseph Pasquier required such a result regardless of the trouble it might occasion to those under his orders.

After a brief skirmish, barely intelligible to Mme Pasquier's guests, the involuntary listeners to this interlude, Joseph had replaced the receiver and flung himself on his dinner with a hearty appetite. Then he had carried off Señor Obregon to his study, ordering coffee to be served to them there.

While waiting the arrival of Blaise Delmutter in a car which could not well take more than fifty minutes for the journey and which at this hour would find the roads clear, Joseph began to grumble about the Michoacan.

The storm developed according to ritual, with the usual verbal profusion. The Michoacan was unfortunately not to be compared with any other of Joseph Pasquier's investments: it was a wound in Joseph Pasquier's side. It was a horrible thorn in Joseph Pasquier's flesh. It was a millstone round his neck. It was a boulder across his path. And a great deal more, *tonnerre de sort!* A nightmare which would end by hindering Joseph Pasquier from sleeping, breathing, and living. He was fed up with it. He was sick to death of it. One fine day he'd get rid of the whole undertaking, lock, stock, and barrel, just as it was. It would entail a frightful loss of course, but it would be a damned good riddance, too.

His hands in his pockets, an extinct cigarette hanging from his purple lips, Joseph strode up and down the room. Señor Obregon remained placid in the depths of a leather arm-chair.

'Come to Mexico, Monsieur Pasquier,' he murmured. 'Then you'll see your oil field for yourself. You'll see the

engineers. You 'll see the offices. Above all, you 'll see your lawyer. And you 'll have a glorious trip.'

'You 're the limit!' exclaimed Joseph. 'Do you really suppose by any chance that I 've got time to waste on a trip? Do you really believe that in order to make money it 's absolutely necessary to travel thousands of miles and visit, as you suggest, the actual spot? I 'm the biggest shareholder in the Tasman Palace Hotel, Melbourne. From first to last that affair, like all the others, was handled in my office in the rue du Quatre-Septembre. I 've never set foot in Melbourne and I never intend to. I control a rubber plantation at Pnom Penh, and you may be very sure I shall never go to Pnom Penh and run the risk of catching cholera or some other filthy disease. I 've even had a large vineyard at Hammam-Lif since 1922. Well, I really might go there. A two-day trip: it 's not far and it would be a pleasant change. But Mexico! Monsieur Obregon, you 're not serious! Go to Mexico! I wouldn't dream of such a thing! This business of ours has been going on for exactly twenty-five months. It 's not a business, Monsieur Obregon, it 's a disease. I 've got it here, in my liver. It 's gnawing my vitals, it 's wearing me out. It may even kill me.'

Señor Obregon seemed resigned to enduring Joseph Pasquier's lamentations and outbursts of temper. He smiled patiently and said:

'I 'm not worrying, Monsieur Pasquier. You won't fall ill over the Michoacan, you will grow very rich, fabulously rich. A little more patience and you will be the owner, almost the sole owner—the tenth that you were obliged to allot to Sir Oliver Ellis hardly counts—you will be the owner of a business which in two years, or in three at most, will put you on a level with the Mexican Eagle.'

Joseph had drunk his coffee and had just poured himself out a generous dose of armagnac in a balloon glass as large as a pumpkin. He drank, and suddenly choked.

'And the lawsuit, Monsieur Obregon! And the lawsuit! And every month a pip, as you so admirably put it. And the

bills that keep falling due! And at the present moment—I've not yet paid in the amount for May—seventy-two thousand dollars which I've had to fork out and which may be a dead loss, Obre . . . Monsieur Obregon.'

The Mexican was not a man to suffer familiarities, and Joseph had not failed to notice it, distracted though he might be with a thousand and one cares. Generally Joseph was in the habit, not later than the second conversation, of calling his partners without warning by their bare surnames, or even by their Christian names, or it might be by a nickname. He couldn't quite stop himself from doing this with Señor Obregon; but he saw a shadow flit across that sallow countenance. So he beat a retreat and promptly corrected himself.

'Seventy thousand dollars,' said the Mexican serenely. 'Eighty-two thousand dollars presently: that's a very small amount, Monsieur Joseph Pasquier, if in two years the Michoacan is going to bring you in, as no doubt it will, a million dollars a year, or two, or even three, or maybe even four million dollars a year.'

At that point in the discussion, and as if to put a decent end to this bidding, young Blaise Delmuter appeared. He had just got out of the car, frigid and frozen, the collar of his overcoat turned up, his nose reddened by a cold which he immediately declared he had caught in 'that car' during 'this night drive.' Joseph hardly heard him. He excused himself with perfunctory haste, thanked Blaise curtly as he snatched from his hands the portfolio full of papers, and suddenly exclaimed:

'Sit down there at the desk. I want to dictate a letter.'

'I'm cold,' breathed the young man.

'You surely don't expect me to start the central heating at Whitsuntide,' was Joseph's surly reply. 'You don't know what it costs. Got your pen? Right. Have a drop of armagnac. There's nothing better for a chill than a good dose of armagnac. And now, just wait.'

Joseph plunged into the dossier like a wild boar into a newly sown cornfield. He had a remarkable knack of imme-

diately extracting from a stack of papers the two or three essential, usable sentences, the significant figure. He looked as if he were ploughing up the papers with his nose and turning them over with his jaw. And from time to time he fetched a grunt from the very depths of his interior.

Señor Obregon had just lit a cigar. By way of making conversation, he said to young Delmutter condescendingly:

‘Cold in the car? Is that so?’

As the secretary made no rejoinder the Mexican went on:

‘Now with us, business men never work after six in the evening.’

Joseph cleared his throat with terrific effect. All the liqueur glasses shattered simultaneously on their tray. A little later on, when Señor Obregon was beginning to yawn, Joseph rose to his feet and walked about, waving some pages which he was holding in his left hand. He seemed worried.

‘Take this down, young Blaise,’ he said. ‘It’s a letter to the lawyer. What’s his name again, that lawyer fellow?’

‘Señor Alonzo Zaldumbide,’ answered the Mexican in that voice which so curiously combined harshness with suavity.

‘Too long! Too complicated to pronounce! Among ourselves I shall call him Zaldum. And devil take the “bide”! Write, young Blaise! Get it typed to-morrow morning, two copies. You’ll come back here with one copy and leave the other in the dossier. Write. . . I’ll sign, and then it can go at once: there’s a boat the day after to-morrow. Write. . . You’ll look through my letter very carefully, young Blaise. Not a slip, mind you. Not a single slip or I’ll have the whole thing done again. And now write, for God’s sake.’

‘Monsieur le Président,’ put in the young man very gently, ‘I forgot to tell you that just before I left there was a telephone call from M. du Thillot. On leaving us he went straight to the ministry to see M. Fourdillat. He found him there. And he was actually received by him.’

‘That’s splendid,’ exclaimed Joseph, stopping dead in the midst of his vehement career. ‘Splendid! Well, what then?’

‘Unfortunately the minister won’t hear of increasing the quota. He began to rage. I’m told he shouted: “Not at any price!”’

With a cry that resembled the trumpeting of an elephant Joseph resumed his course.

“‘Not at any price!’” he repeated. ‘Well, we’ll see about that. I’ll take it up with you again later I’ll take it up with you to-morrow morning. Be here without fail before twelve. You can lunch here, with us. Do you hear, young Blaise? And now write: “To Señor Alonzo Thingumabob . . . Thingumajig . . . Zaldum—whatever-it-is.” Well, you know what I mean. Now I’m going on: “Although Señor Alonzo” . . . Yes . . . “is in a position to visit the spot, and has at his disposal at the present moment all the documents in the case, I wish in this letter to give him my own personal opinion on the development of the affair.

“‘The disobliging attitude on the one hand of the Naphth Oil Co., and in particular of its managing director M. Herbert Doyster”—that’s his name, isn’t it, Monsieur Obregon?—“and on the other hand of Señor Cristobal”—What’s the blighter’s name? . . . Cienfuegos? You did say Cienfuegos? Such names, if you don’t mind my saying so, are only fit for the dust-heap—“of Señor Cristobal Cienfuegos, acting in the name of a firm calling itself Mexican but actually half Yankee, and, if the truth were told, Mexican only for form’s sake, and having regard to the susceptibilities of the present Mexican Government . . .” You’ll fix all that up, young Blaise; see that it’s perfectly civil, flawless as to style, but strong; in fact rap them good and hard. Now I’m going on: “The disobliging attitude of Messrs. So-and-so and What’s-his-name became noticeable in April 1923, when we began erecting the derrick for the first well, called the Joseph well. That well has yielded two hundred barrels a day, which is nothing phenomenal”—don’t put “phenomenal.” You’ll think of something more distinguished—“but which was at least fairly . . . fairly . . . promising.” Find me some other word suggesting that there were hopes. . . .

"From that moment Messrs. This and That"—they get on my nerves with their impossible names—"claimed the right to object to the transport of my oil across a certain part of their concessions where I can affirm"—isn't that so, Monsieur Obregon?—"there is nothing but stones and spiky plants, and quite certainly no buildings." In fact, nothing. That's what you've always told me, Monsieur Obregon? Now I'm going on: "Although the Mexican law assures me a right of way over the land of the N.O.C. and over that of Cristo"—Cristomush Toad-in-the-hole—"I have had to institute proceedings before the Mexican court and pay in a sum as security. Only the first instalment, worse luck! I was obliged to bore the second well, the Laurent, nearer the road, much too near the road probably. And it has yielded nothing. And yet it has been drilled down to three hundred feet. And the engineer, Señor Lopez de Quevedo, has suggested drilling down further to six hundred feet, which would entail an unforeseen outlay of ten thousand dollars." You're surely not getting drowsy, young Blaise?

'I'm cold,' replied the young man.

'Well, you're lucky. I'm too hot. Go on writing. That's only the start. Here you point out in a few words that all the wells sunk up to date only yield oil by pumping, which means a terrific extra outlay on plant.'

'But,' intervened Señor Obregon in placid tones, 'our lawyer is already well aware of all this, and it can't carry the slightest weight with the court. These are merely the difficulties incidental to the undertaking.'

'I beg your pardon. I am speaking to my lawyer, and I have my own way of managing my affairs and speaking to lawyers. Blowing your nose, Blaise? Well, have another nip of armagnac. Not too much, you know. It's you who will have to drive back to Paris, and M. Obregon's rather nervous, or at least he has his own ideas about the proper speed of a car. Right; I was speaking about the lawyer. The lawyer ought to know all about my point of view. He ought to know that at that moment, that is to say in January

1924, I had already paid rent for two half-years, that is to say, twice ten thousand dollars, plus fifteen thousand dollars for preliminary expenses, plus three times ten thousand dollars for drilling the first three wells, and two thousand dollars security. He knows all this better than any one else, since he was the fellow who handled those dollars. Now don't say I'm exaggerating, because I have all the figures here, in my head.'

'But,' said Señor Obregon imperturbably, 'you've won your case, and everything is going comparatively well.'

'What's that?' scolded Joseph. 'What's that? You say I've won my case when those two creatures with the indigestible names, the Mexican and the Yank, have immediately put in an appeal and we're still at it, and I've had to close the Laurent well, and I've had to send off another five thousand dollars, and the fourth well, the Jean-Pierre, has yielded nothing at all.'

'You're too impatient,' murmured Señor Obregon 'I've already advised you to consult experts. They will tell you that Deterding and Rockefeller are not nervous men. They will tell you that it's quite normal to have to dig wells for nothing. The good wells pay for the poor ones, and they pay a hundredfold. You are aware that all our information is favourable, whether it comes from your consulate, or from the Minister of Public Works, or from the consulting engineers, or above all from Sir Oliver Ellis, whom everybody trusts. Besides which, well number five has been yielding nearly four hundred barrels per day. What do you call that well?'

'The Lucien. Yes, but the Hélène well has yielded nothing but salt water. And presently I've got to pay you a sum of ten thousand dollars, which will make eighty-two thousand dollars! That's what the English call chucking good money after bad. Are you asleep, Blaise?'

'No, monsieur le Président.'

Joseph paused in his stride for a half-second. For the last four or five years all the people in his entourage had addressed him as 'monsieur le Président.' For a good while this had given him considerable satisfaction. Now, he began to covet

other verbal caresses. That same day Ricamus had addressed him as 'mon cher maître.' That had certainly tickled his ear very pleasantly. It had seemed to him of good omen for 'that affair of the quai Conti,' as he whispered confidentially to his intimates. He had a sudden itch to say to Blaise Delmuter: 'From now on, you can call me "cher maître"' He wavered for a few minutes, debating whether or no he would give this somewhat peculiar instruction, but decided to await a more dramatic occasion, and finally he resumed the dictation of the famous letter. It was in truth an interminable letter, in which, with astonishing digressions, he enlarged upon the difficulties, the set-backs he had encountered in the Michoacan venture; a letter in the course of which he showered lyrical invectives on these interlopers, these spoil-sports, all these Herberts and Cristobals, all these nobodies who claimed to deny him the right to conduct his little affairs in peace; a letter full of subtle trickeries interwoven with remarks of an unaffected naivety, a letter which, in fine, with all its decoration of inventive threats against the adversary, was in fact the carefully prepared outline of a most adroit and audacious piece of special pleading.

Señor Obregon was smoking cigar after cigar and yawning without disguise. Now and then Joseph would pause to consider an idea. Then there could be heard off-stage the tinkle of a guitar and spurts of laughter. Joseph's face would suffer a nervous contraction. The left corner of his mouth would stretch out almost to the cheek-bone, and he would shake his grizzled head like a horse troubled with flies. Then the dispute would flare up again. The Mexican kept on repeating: 'If for eighty-two thousand dollars, including to-day's payment, you get this fine business into your own hands—for Sir Oliver Ellis may well be willing to sell you his rights—you must allow me to say, Monsieur Pasquier, that in spite of everything the undertaking will be a success, that indeed it will turn out to be a scandalously profitable affair.'

'Why "scandalously"?' snapped Joseph. 'There's no scandal if the affair succeeds, only if it fails.'

And he resumed his prowling about the room, like a storm in search of the spot on which to discharge its fury of thunder and rain.

A little after a quarter to eleven, the letter having at last been dictated to the final syllable, Obregon was handed the cheque for ten thousand dollars, but not before an extraordinary scene had been enacted in which Joseph, in a voice dripping with emotion, whether genuine or feigned it was impossible to tell, declared that at the next 'pip,' as Señor Obregon called it, he would make up his mind to get clear of the whole affair, even if he had to sell out at a loss, because this was the first time in his life that . . . because never, never had he tolerated . . . because he, Joseph Pasquier, was only superstitious about one thing, and that was bad luck, and this being so . . .

At half-past eleven Obregon got into the car with Déodat Ricamus. Lucien suddenly appeared in hat and overcoat. He flung himself into the fourth seat, saying that he was going to sleep in town but would be back the next morning.

'It's unthinkable,' exclaimed Joseph Pasquier, making use quite unconsciously of an expression of his late father's. 'It's unthinkable! We bring you down to the country to build up your health, and on the second night you go back and sleep in Paris. I don't like that at all.'

'Father,' replied the young man quietly, 'I think you forget that I am twenty-three.'

On those words he slammed the door and the car started. Mme Pasquier senior was not on the terrace beside her husband: a light could be seen from the window of her bedroom. For a moment Joseph was left alone in the dark. He could hear at the end of the drive the creak of the iron gate as it closed. A little later the headlights of the car shone through the trees from the road winding down the valley.

Joseph did not immediately go back to the house. He followed a path across the lawns and the clumps of trees. The night was cold and clear. With lowered head Joseph walked on, staring down at the gravel. He held his breath under

the strain of his thoughts and then released it forcibly as navvies do at their work. Then the paths led uphill rather steeply and very soon Joseph found himself on a sort of plateau. Then he raised his head, saw the sky, and sighed deeply. It never occurred to Joseph deliberately to look at the sky. For a considerable time he continued to gaze in wonder at the stars, which were numerous and very bright. The stars! Yes, those were indeed the stars! Confused, childish schoolboy memories crowded into Joseph's mind. He saw before him a book of 'object lessons' with a big drawing of the Great Bear. Then his thoughts stole away to a certain brand of petrol, then to the American flag. The stars! Joseph breathed a long sigh not merely from his lungs, but from every fibre of his being. Then once more he looked earthwards. First of all he caught sight of the rectangular tennis court surrounded with climbing roses whose vernal leafage could be guessed at in the dusk. And then, farther on, he saw the whole of the château.

It was an imposing pile, built at the end of the eighteenth century, a really lordly dwelling-place, possibly a little too lofty, as in addition to the ground floor where the reception rooms were situated, there were two floors of bedrooms and a wing of three storeys which contained the children's rooms, and where their friends were accommodated when they had them down to stay.

It was a fine house! Joseph admired its impressive outline, all white in that night of May. It was not one of those inherited homes whose every stone, rafter, and slate is familiar. Neither was it like those properties which for the last fifteen years Joseph had owned at Mesnil-sur-Loire, or at Beaulieu in the south, a domain long coveted and eventually acquired by dint of much patience. Joseph was far beyond the days of long patience. Montredon, for him, was comparable to a magnificent booty. He had sighted this prey in passing, more than four years previously. He had suddenly swooped on it, like an eagle, with outstretched talons. There are men who toil all their lives to attain the object of their desires. For

his part, Joseph no longer cared for any victories but those achieved in a moment of intense excitement, like a criminal assault.

This noble, sumptuous mansion, thus snatched by force, after a terrific wrangle, from a stunned notary, Joseph had eventually made his very own after spending three million francs in altering it to suit his fancy. It pleased him so well that he came to neglect his other properties and was always finding excuses for staying there, even against the wishes of Hélène and the three children, who always preferred Paris or the mountains or the seaside, each of them always seeking some pretext for dragging the others in his or her chosen direction.

Alone in the night, Joseph feasted his eye for many minutes on this scene and on this possession. Then without further consultation of the stars he made his way down past the copses and terraced lawns.

The house was now completely silent. Joseph pulled out the bunch of keys which always jangled in his pocket and was fastened to his belt with a steel chain; then he closed the doors. Putting out all the lights behind him, he reached his study. The stale smell of cigar smoke, blending with that of alcohol, struck offensively on his nostrils now cleansed by the night air. He sat down thoughtfully at the long Empire table which he used as a desk. With a weary, fumbling, yet eager hand he fished through the drawers. He ended by pulling out two sheets of letter paper. One bore, engraved on the upper left-hand corner, the following inscription: 'Montredon, par Butry (Seine-et-Oise). Tél. 43.' The other sheet, of a bluish white, was perfectly blank.

It was this latter sheet that Joseph placed carefully before him on the blotter. Then he pulled out of his pocket a piece of somewhat crumpled paper on which were visible some lines scribbled in pencil; thus he placed in front of him.

With the care of a schoolboy copying his model, Joseph began to write:

'MONSIEUR LE SECRÉTAIRE PERPÉTUEL,

'I have the honour to offer myself as a candidate for the seat left vacant by the decease of M. Petit-Belair. . . .'

Here there occurred a moment of perplexity; Joseph asking himself if it was more proper to write Monsieur in full, or to put M and a full stop. 'The marquis has queer ideas,' thought Joseph Pasquier. 'Now I should have written "the seat left vacant by the decease of your distinguished and regretted *confrère*, Monsieur Petit-Belair. . . ." But it seems that it's better form to be quite simple. So I suppose we must keep to their blessed traditions.' Thereupon, with a shrug of the shoulders, he went on writing:

'I should be grateful if you would be so kind as to inform the members of the company . . .'

Joseph stopped once more. Originally he had been of opinion that at this point in a communication of such importance it would not have been out of place, or even superfluous, to introduce a clash of cymbals, to indulge in a glittering and sonorous manifestation, to proclaim, for instance, the titles of his works on political economy and his two brochures devoted to the pictorial arts, and to state in modest but unmistakable terms that so far as modern painting was concerned he was considered one of the foremost collectors of the old world, and even to mention that he was the chairman of twenty societies, at least three of which were purely philanthropic . . . and that . . . and also . . . Unfortunately M. de Janville, when dictating the formula consecrated by tradition, had declared it to be quite adequate, and that any supererogatory effusions might easily be ill received. With a sigh of regret Joseph picked up his fountain-pen again and wrote a few more words, shaking his head discontentedly:

'And believe me, Monsieur le Secrétaire perpétuel, to be your respectful and devoted servant,

'JOSEPH PASQUIER.'

There! It's very bald. Why not add, at this particular point, something simple and obvious, such as 'commandeur de la Légion d'honneur'? How could such a thing have a bad effect? No, no, we mustn't yield to this temptation: the Marquis de Janville had pointed out to the candidate that the perpetual secretary was himself only an officer of the national order and that, in any case, 'it wasn't done.'

Joseph shrugged his shoulders, folded the letter, and slipped it into an envelope which, like the white sheet, was without any inscription. Then he picked up the other sheet, the one bearing the proud address of Montredon, and now he let his pen flow without restraint.

'MY DEAR LAURENT,' he wrote, 'I wish to let you know at once what I have done, and even to ask you something of a favour. I am offering myself as a candidate for the seat left vacant by the death of that wretched Petit-Belair, whom you probably met in the past at M. Chaligny's. I know, or at least, I understand, that you will be elected to the Académie des Sciences whenever you wish to apply. It has been so stated in the papers, not that that means much; but I have actually heard it from friends of yours who are by way of being well informed, and I am only too delighted for your sake. I have no idea of what your plans are in this connection, but I should be grateful if you did not offer yourself until my election is an accomplished fact, which perhaps will not be very long. I am well aware that I am not applying to the same academy as yourself. Nevertheless I fancy that, for the Institut, two Pasquers at one go would look rather conspicuous and, in the eyes of those unfavourably disposed towards us, rather greedy. So let me get in first, my dear Laurent, inasmuch as your election at a subsequent date will be just as certain as it would be to-day. That is not so in my case, and I must avail myself of this favourable opportunity without hesitation. And do not forget that I am your elder. Six or seven years makes a difference, and gives, after all, a right of precedence. In any case I am asking this of

you as a personal favour. You will understand me, and I'm sure you wouldn't wish to disappoint your old brother, who sends you his best love.

'JOSEPH.

'PS. I am so sure of your feelings in this matter, that I am sending off my application by the same post. None the less, I shall eagerly look forward to your reply.'

Joseph had dashed off this letter without a pause, finding it much easier to write than the other. This he also put in an envelope, stamped both of them, and left them in a prominent place on his desk. Then he looked at his watch. It was a quarter to one. Then he rose, stretched lengthily several times, opened a cupboard, picked up a pair of felt slippers, slipped them on, and left his study with muffled tread. Perfect silence reigned within the walls of the sleeping house. Joseph did not turn on the electric lights, but he switched on his pocket torch, which gave out a subdued glimmer.

With the slow movements of a thief on the alert, Joseph Pasquer descended the stairs which led into the bowels of the house. He passed the floor of the kitchen premises, where everything was still and silent, and then the floor of the wine cellars. At last he reached an iron door and opened it with a small key of peculiar design. He pushed open the door, took a step in the dark, and closed the door behind him. Then, and not till then, he groped about till he found a switch. A dazzling light immediately shone forth from three powerful ceiling lights.

It was not a cellar. It was something like an Egyptian *mastaba*, a large rectangular room, dug out of the rock of the plateau, a cavernous space, wholesome and dry, whose sides were everywhere lined with pinkish brick. Enormous oak presses took up one of the long sides. Against the opposite wall were stacked chests, hampers, leather trunks, and iron boxes. At the far end could be seen the plaque of a safe sunk in concrete.

Since the day when this retreat had been built and equipped

by a team of Italian workmen brought from no one knew where and quickly spinted off again, no one had ever entered this mysterious chamber. Joseph visited it alone, and almost always at night. As he was very strong, when he had a parcel or a load, no matter how heavy and cumbersome, he managed to carry it himself.

In the middle of the rectangle, in the free space, there was an arm-chair—a peasant's chair with a rush seat—and a small table.

Joseph began by opening the doors of the presses. No smell of mildew: everything was neat and clean. Not a speck of dust, not a trace of damp. Then Joseph sat down in the chair and stared straight in front of him. The presses were crowded with a chaotic multitude of precious objects, stacked on the shelves according to the date of purchase or to mere chance. There was a tremendous accumulation of silverware, fine china, vases, cut crystal, ivories, and bronzes. There were phials full of strange liquids, jade figures, statuettes, tear bottles, Chinese pieces, enamels, lacquer-ware, incense-burners, cups, fans, chandeliers, pots, silver-gilt and gold ewers, pyxes, crosses, chalices and ikons decked out in fine silver and even encrusted with precious stones. On each object was stuck a label bearing a date, a number, and sometimes a remark in the big schoolboy script of Joseph Pasquier himself.

There he was in his arm-chair in front of his wide-open presses. He was in the mood to go to the safe, manipulate the combination lock, and feast his eyes on the jewels, the necklaces, the rings, the pearls, the pendants, the bracelets, the buckles, the bars of rare metals, the loose stones in little bags. He longed to open the chests, the cases, the walnut cabinets, the iron trunks and take out the treasures he had well-nigh forgotten but which, nevertheless, were there: the embroideries, the reliquaries, the gold ink-stands, the crowns.

He had a great longing to feast his eyes once more on all these spoils, but to-night as on other nights, each time he came down into this chamber, he felt overtaken with an incomprehensible lassitude, and he began to drowse, a trickle

of saliva at the corner of his mouth, his big hands, with their tufts of dark hairs, resting limply on his numbed knees.

One by one, not without regret, Joseph closed his presses. He picked up his torch and with a heavy stare assured himself that all was well in this kingdom of his own, this secret lair. Then he switched off the ceiling lights, closed the door, and locked it carefully, pondering every move.

No sooner was he on the stairs than he turned and went back to make sure once more that the door was properly closed and that the safety catch had been given the right double turn. There he stood at that door, suddenly petrified, immovably heavy, his heart beating hard against his muscular chest.

Eventually he climbed, with heavy steps, floor by floor, as far as his study. Then, seized with a sudden inspiration, he unhooked the telephone and rang for a long time, turning a handle.

At last a man's voice came to him across the empty spaces of the night. It said: 'What is your number? What do you want?' Joseph replied, disquieted at hearing through the silence the sound that came from his throat. 'This is 43 Butry,' he said. 'Give me Trinité 53-79.' A sleepy colloquy flitted about the void. Then there came a shrill ringing, repeating itself endlessly somewhere at the ends of the earth. At last a woman's drowsy voice reached the hairy ear of M. Joseph Pasquier. It said: 'Who's there? What do you want?' He answered, subduing the thunder of his normal speech. 'It's me! It's me, I say. Forgive me, Miotte. I was thinking about you. And then the idea came to me to ask you something. . . .' There was a profound silence, and then the far-off voice resumed: 'What do you want, my poor Joseph? I was fast asleep. Why did you wake me?'—'Forgive me,' he replied. 'I wanted to hear you, to make sure you were there.'—'Well, where would you expect me to be?'—'Say something to me, Miotte, say . . . say that you think of me.'

He was stammering, suddenly pitiful, groping for his words

like a bashful schoolboy. The far-off voice replied once more: 'Come, go to bed, my poor Josi. And do let me get to sleep.'

By the sound that echoed within the instrument, Joseph Pasquier gathered that his mysterious interlocutor had cut the connection. He replaced the receiver and staggered to his feet. Suddenly he found himself in front of a tall clock, which started to strike. It was two in the morning. A cock crew in the village near the river. Joseph had not yet been to sleep. A new day was dawning on the edge of eternity.

V

It was not an outstanding Utrillo; it was a delicate and even a charming Utrillo. Joseph set the picture on a chair in a good light and examined it carefully. It represented a suburban street, with a chalk-white house on the left, a tobacconist's on the right, and then some walls over which trees spread their green branches. On the street pavement two women were walking, only their backs being visible; they were both drawn rather sketchily, with their salient posteriors, their leg-of-mutton sleeves, and their wide-brimmed hats such as were worn in Paris about the year 1905.

'You've bought this Utrillo?' repeated Joseph between his teeth. 'What an idea!'

'But, father,' said Lucien, 'you can't think it strange that I should start a collection of my own'

Joseph made no immediate rejoinder. He seemed taken aback and annoyed.

'You've bought this Utrillo,' he said at last. 'With whose money, I wonder?'

'That's my affair,' said the young man with an almost imperceptible wink. 'It certainly can't have been with your money, father; you never leave it lying about.'

Joseph shook his head.

'With whose money then, my boy?'

'You must admit it's not bad.'

Joseph protruded his lips.

'No, not bad. In fact it's quite good. It's a twenty-five. It's worth twenty-five thousand francs.'

'Father,' said the youth promptly. 'I'll pass it on to you for fifteen thousand. Be careful, it's still wet. It isn't even signed.'

Joseph shook his head suspiciously.

'No, no,' he growled. 'I buy direct from the dealers or the artists. Why isn't it signed?'

'Ah, well,' said Lucien with a smile, 'we'd better ask the painter.'

With that he ran from the room. From outside came the sound of a brief altercation. Then Lucien reappeared, thrusting forward with some difficulty a very shamefaced, blushing Jean-Pierre Pasquier.

'Lucien,' protested the lad, clinging to the door, 'Lucien, you promised to say nothing to father.'

'What does all this mean?' scolded Joseph, his hair suddenly bristling, his eyes suffused with blood, his features contorted. 'What sort of joke is this?'

'It means, father, that here is the painter of the picture.'

Without a word Joseph seized the canvas and, with a furious gesture, flung it to the ground.

'Come,' chuckled Lucien, pursing his lips; 'be a good sport and admit you've been had.'

Joseph did not reply at once. He was striding up and down the room, shaking his head repeatedly in stubborn denial. At last he spoke without looking at either of the boys, his voice trembling with rage:

'Did you really suppose, Lucien, that you'd get money out of me by a trick like that?'

Lucien gave a light laugh.

'Certainly not, father. I shall be asking you for money presently, but I shall go about it quite differently.'

Joseph shrugged his shoulders and growled between his teeth:

'My dear fellow, you can try it on and you'll see what you'll get. As for this wretched little forger . . .'

'No, no, father. Leave Jeanpi alone. He had nothing whatever to do with the joke. Forger? Nothing of the sort! The canvas isn't even signed.'

'Well, then, what were you at, my boy? Just making fun of me?'

'Not even that. I only wanted to show you that Jeanpi has got talent, in his own way, and get you to see it.'

'Oh, really! That's what you wanted! No doubt what both of you wanted. . . .'

Joseph had gone over and picked up the picture, which, as it happened, had not actually been damaged in the scrimmage, and was waving it angrily about at arm's length when the study door opened and Blaise Delmutter appeared. He was dressed, as ever, in that black morning coat which he referred to as his uniform. He said in calm, icy tones:

'News from Mexico, monsieur le Président. Please take up the receiver. M. Obregon wishes to speak to you.'

Joseph put the picture down on a side table, leapt to his desk, and unhooked the receiver. For the space of a minute or two he listened, his eyes set, his face suffused with blood. From time to time he said: 'Yes, yes, right . . . certainly.' Then he put back the instrument, passed a hairy hand over his brow, and shouted in uncontrolled jubilation:

'Young Blaise, find Mlle Delphine.'

'I will institute a search for Mlle Delphine. May I remind monsieur le Président that within an hour and twenty minutes he must be at the Avenue Hoche, at M. Faugerolle's, the member of the Institut, who has made him an appointment, and that moreover monsieur le Président must find time not later than to-day to look through the speech that he is to read to-morrow at the ceremony of the centenary of the École des Arts Graphiques.'

The end of the sentence was hardly audible. Joseph, with a look of annoyance, thrust the young man in the well-cut morning coat out into the hall, and then, immediately the door

was closed, turned towards his two sons. He was suddenly smiling and jovial. He spoke calmly, weighing his words.

'At the Louvre,' he said, 'there is always a crowd of down-and-outs who are perfectly capable of turning out copies of Raphael, or Leonardo, or Veronese, or anybody else, and who have no more genius than a fly. You get me, Jean-Pierre?'

Jean-Pierre hid his face behind his arm and began to weep.

'It's sickening!' said Joseph, shrugging his shoulders. 'I was perfectly calm, perfectly matter-of-fact, and here we have tears! Always tears! And you know there's nothing that exasperates me more than to see you cry. But, my poor boy, get through your exams, your two *bachots*, that's all I ask of you for the present. Later we can talk about painting. If you really have genius, we're bound to notice it eventually. For the present, don't come bothering me and get on with the work for your exams. You see, I was in quite a good mood, for personal reasons . . . anyhow, I was in a good mood. And here you come putting me in a temper, spoiling my day. Ah! It's you, Finette. Yes, I've something to tell you. Come in for a minute, Finette. What's that you've got in your hand?'

Delphine was standing in the doorway, shielding her eyes from the light with a flat cardboard box, tied with a ribbon, which she was clasping in her left hand.

'Oh, nothing, father,' she stammered, 'just a little toilet article.'

Delphine was then twenty-two. Her features were not without charm, but she was short, plump, and rather heavy in build. Moreover, she was very short-sighted and refused to wear glasses and so always looked dazed and startled by the light.

'I've something to tell you, Finette,' repeated Joseph Pasquier in a tone which he intended to be affectionate but which still sounded somewhat rough. 'Something to tell you. Yes, I know you want me to call you Delphine. I suppose I shall get used to it. Just a little patience. Now, come, don't look so worried. What I have to tell you is something good, quite good news in fact.'

Delphine glanced at her father apprehensively, like someone who does not dare even in the secret depths of his heart

imagine anything that might be looked upon as good news. Then Joseph Pasquier declared in a triumphant voice:

'The Delphine well is yielding oil under pressure. They're going to cable me the provisional estimate; but it's bound to be some big figure.'

And when the girl could not conceal an expression of indifference and even of disappointment, he growled from behind a forced smile:

'I thought that would please you. And you don't even seem to realize that this splendid well was christened after you. Ah! Here's M. Blaise, who's perhaps going to bring us further good news.'

'I'm afraid not, monsieur le Président,' said the youthful secretary as he appeared at one of the doors. 'M. du Thillot has telephoned. He didn't seem to wish to speak to you himself. He merely asked me to inform you that M. Fourdillat had replied by a blunt "No," and that it would probably be unwise to persist for the present; he, M. du Thillot, judged that it would be wiser to let matters stand, at any rate temporarily, because the minister was obviously determined'

'Let matters stand temporarily!' The old rat must be crazy!' exclaimed Joseph Pasquier. 'And what does he suppose I'm to do with the hundred tons of good stuff waiting at Saint-Nazaire, and all the rest that is on the way. Let matters stand temporarily! You'll just call up du Thillot and let me give him what for. What do you want, Lucien? Are you boys still there?'

'Before telephoning to du Thillot, father,' said Lucien, 'let me speak to you for five minutes in private?'

'What for? Five minutes, that's out of the question! I've got to read, that is to say, correct this screed for tomorrow, and I've got to call on that old crocodile of a Faugerolle, and I've got to receive here or at the rue du Quatre-Septembre a dozen wretches who are trying their utmost to fleece me, skin me, bleed me to death. Five minutes! Out of the question!'

'So much the worse for you, father. Perhaps you'll be

sorry you couldn't spare me those paltry five minutes, but if you change your mind, and especially if it's before you call up that old du Thillot, you may not need to call him up at all.'

'Eh? What's that?' growled Joseph, stopping suddenly to peer defiantly and suspiciously at his son. 'Very well then; leave us, you two. Off with you, Finette. And don't put on that lugubrious expression when you ought to be getting ready to celebrate. As for you, Jean-Pierre, I'll see you some other time. You'll have to toe the mark, young fellow, or there'll be trouble. Blaise, call the car to the door. Oh, I've still got more than an hour. That doesn't mean I want everybody to come bothering me. Now, out with it, Lucien. "In private," you said. Well, here we are in private. Let's hear what you have to say.'

Lucien was seated in a leather arm-chair, his legs crossed, an Egyptian cigarette between his lips. Taking from his wallet a piece of paper folded in four and holding it up before his eyes as if it were a rare butterfly, he said in a calm, distinct voice:

'Are you really very keen about this Fourdillat business?'

'What, the cryo quota?'

'Yes, the cryo quota.'

'Well, of course I am. But what's that got to do with you?'

'It interests me very much. I repeat my question. Are you really very anxious to get from the minister a substantial increase of your quota?'

'My boy, I can't help wondering how you come to know so much about my affairs. I never talk about them to you.'

'That's where you make a mistake. You never mention them to me, but you talk about them to others. I've got sharp ears.'

'Oh, get on, my boy, get on. Suppose I do want that increase in the quota . . .'

'Exactly three hundred tons.'

'Oh, you know that, do you? Extraordinary! Well, then, let's suppose, my boy, that I need those extra three hundred tons . . .'

'Which the minister won't allow you.'

'Ah, and you know that too?'

'But it has just been stated a moment ago, out loud in front of me.'

'My boy, you 're not deaf.'

'You bet I'm not deaf. I'm only shocked to see you using as a third party an old boy who is quite useless, that du Thillot, that old fathead, that scarecrow who looks as though he had just fallen out of a cherry-tree.'

'My dear boy, the bosom friend of the minister . . .'

'Rats! Supposing your bosom friend came and asked you to do violence to your most cherished principles.'

'I haven't got a bosom friend. Well, then, Fourdillat?'

'Well, Fourdillat,' said the young man scoffingly. 'Fourdillat is incorruptible.'

'That 's another matter,' said Joseph.

He was striding about with his hands in his pockets, his left cheek furrowed almost to the ear by that convulsive grimace which twisted his mouth. He said in an undertone.

'Incorruptible! There are no such men. I, at least, have never met one. The main thing is to find the chunk in the armour of these alleged incorruptibles. With some of them it's money; but that of course is child's play. With others, it's their family. With others, it's honours. Windbags! With others, it's pride, vainglory. Some—and this is really funny—some can be got at through their virtue. You say to them: "You, I know, are quite incorruptible." Then they start to talk drivel, and meanwhile you proceed to worm things out of them, or they sign their names to something, or they betray their pals; in short, they go all mushy.'

'By Jove, father,' said the young man, 'you take a rather pessimistic, not to say bitter, view of humanity.'

'Me!' said Joseph, looking shocked. 'Me? Not a bit of it. I have the greatest respect for humanity. I only ask one thing, that it will damn well let me alone. Now then, about Fourdillat?'

'I tell you he's incorruptible,' mocked Lucien.

'With him it's perhaps women,' pondered Joseph, a far-away look in his eye. 'When it's women one can sometimes do quite a lot, even with very old geezers.'

'No,' said Lucien definitely, 'with Fourdillat it's not . . . women.'

'What do you know about it, my lad?'

'In the matter of women he's already supplied, father. Like all the ministers of any importance he has his damsel from the *Comédie Française*. Up to now she absorbs whatever reserves of energy the old boy may possess.'

'Is that so? Who is she?'

'I'll tell you another day. Now, father, listen to me, if you really wish to get hold of that extra quota, I myself can get it for you.'

'You!' said Joseph, regarding his son with a fixed and globular eye. 'You! It's unthinkable!'

'It's quite thinkable. Only, listen, father. My dodge is a splendidferous dodge and I'm not giving it away for nothing. Father, read this memo.'

With delicate gestures Lucien had just unfolded the sheet of paper which he had been holding between his first finger and thumb. He held it out to his father.

Joseph took out his big spectacles from their showy case. Then with an air of astonishment he examined the paper, on which these words were traced in a very clear hand: 'I, the undersigned Joseph Pasquier, promise that if my son Louis Pasquier finds a practical solution of the problem of the quota for the "cryogen" apparatus, I will pay him a commission of thirty thousand francs with which to purchase a car of his own choice, which will be reserved for his personal use.'

Joseph dealt his thigh a mighty slap.

'Splendid!' he exclaimed, laughing and choking. 'Thirty thousand francs! Dirt cheap, eh, my little man? Thirty thousand francs, no more and no less! Thirty thousand francs falling into your lap, my lad! Now if you were to say five hundred francs, or a thousand, or if at the very most

you were to say two thousand francs! But thirty thousand francs, why it's enough to make one die of laughing. Thirty thousand francs, not a penny less!

'Not a penny less, father, you've said it.'

'And if I don't give you these precious thirty thousand francs?'

'Ah, well,' rejoined Lucien blandly, 'then you won't be told anything and you won't put your deal through.'

Joseph had just halted in the middle of the room, with legs astraddle and hands in trouser pockets, leaden hands which at this moment seemed to weigh a hundredweight each. He began to speak slowly, with a slight quaver in his voice, as was not unusual with him in pathetic moments, when he was discussing business and trying out his whole bag of tricks.

'You probably don't know anything,' he said. 'But let's suppose for a moment that you do know something interesting, something that might be of use to your old father, the man who brought you up, the man who keeps and feeds you—and you won't tell me anything about it unless I give you . . . ten thousand francs!'

Lucien smiled sweetly and shook his head slowly from left to right and back again.

'Most certainly not, father. I shan't open my mouth unless you give me thirty thousand francs. Thirty thousand francs was what I wrote. You're making a mistake in the figure.'

'You probably don't know a thing that's any use,' said Joseph again, taking his hands out of his pockets.

He raised his arms slowly and let them fall to his sides in a gesture of discouragement.

'You're having me on,' he growled. 'It's a piece of outrageous impudence on your part. You're trying to get a considerable sum out of me in exchange for some information of no practical value.'

'Father,' said the young man, in a dry tone tinged with mockery, 'it's you who are trying it on. I'm offering to do a deal with you. You know better than any one what is meant by a deal. I give you a tip; then one of two things

happens: either the whole business is a flop and you don't owe me anything, or it goes through to your satisfaction and you owe me thirty thousand francs. And allow me to point out that you don't risk anything I might have asked for an advance, insisted on an advance, a guarantee, a deposit.'

'A guarantee!' echoed Joseph, wagging his head with an air of stupefaction. 'A deposit! You might have insisted! Stupendous!'

'Stupendous?' Nothing of the sort. Just natural. If I were a broker, now . . .'

'Well, you're not a broker. You're a law student.'

'Well, let's drop the subject. Father, hand me back the paper.'

'No, no, let me think it over.'

'If you think too long you'll miss your appointment with Faugerolle, who's got a serpent's tongue, the most poisonous of all your future colleagues'

'Not colleagues . . . we say *confrères*.'

'*Confrères*, then, if you like. I don't care. Now hand me that paper.'

'No, no, my boy, I'll sign it. But just let's fix up a more reasonable figure. Fifteen thousand francs, for instance.'

'No Give me back the paper. I shall inform my agent . '

'You've got an agent?'

'And why not? I'm my father's son. I shall instruct my agent to apply to others, to the Frigo Company, or the Glacières Électriques.'

Joseph gave a sort of yelp; then he began to shout:

'I've begotten a monster. I'll sign your paper. After all, it doesn't bind me.'

'Oh, but it does, but only to pay in the case of a successful deal.'

'Here you are, my lad, I'm signing. I sign "Joseph Pasquier." Legibly, as I always do.'

'Hold on, father. The paper isn't in your handwriting. Write: "Read and approved."'

'You're mighty sharp, and no mistake. You'll have to

give me lessons. And now let's hear your tip. I bet it's all bunkum.'

'All right, then give me back the paper. It's certainly not bunkum and I am dead sure of having my car before the end of the month. You understand, father? Fourdillat is incorruptible. There's no getting at him by means of money, or friendship, or women. He doesn't care about art. He's not a collector . . .'

'Yes, well, what then?'

'Well, though at present he's a minister, he was elected deputy for Cantal by a very slender majority—fifty-two, to be exact.'

'You know that? What of it?'

'Fourdillat's afraid of nothing; all right. But he's in a blue funk about not being re-elected.'

'I can guess your dodge. A matter of blackmail over the election. Complicated! Shady! Shady!'

'No, you haven't come near guessing it. You are going to buy lentils.'

'Oh! Maybe. We shall see. Why?'

'Patience! I'll tell you. You are going to buy three hundred tons of Cantal lentils.'

'Possibly. . . . Let's hear some more.'

'The Cantal farmers have been growing lentils on the advice of Fourdillat during the last legislature, when he couldn't hit upon any other device for putting a little life into the blighters. They produced enormous quantities of lentils, which at present are held by the co-operative societies. Fourdillat has promised to ensure their disposal. Now they happen to be small-sized lentils, which are almost unsalable.'

'What do you expect me to do about it?'

'Oh, do let me finish, father. You really are unreasonable. You have a way of dealing with business matters that is most discouraging.'

'That's right, young man, teach your father. And what am I to do with the lentils?'

'Well, you'll sell them again.'

'But you say they're unsalable.'

'Let's take things in their order, please. You buy from these Cantal people their three hundred tons of lentils. In return, Fourdillat manages to get you a licence to import three hundred tons of cryogen, as an emergency quota.'

'Wait a bit. How about the committee of the importers of refrigerators? . . . H'm, yes. . . . No. . . . Yes, I'll look after that. I know those fellows'

'You keep on interrupting me. To-morrow I'll bring Monsieur T. here to see you.'

'Who's this Monsieur T.?'

'My lawyer.'

'Your lawyer? My boy, you bowl me over.'

'You did the same, I expect, thirty years ago to my grandfather, Doctor Pasquier.'

'Not a bit of it. He never knew a thing.'

'If you interrupt me again you'll muss your Fourdillat. Ah, here's Blaise Delmuter.'

Joseph whipped round in a flash.

'What do you want, young man?'

'Monsieur le Président, it's M. Sanasoff.'

'Tell him to go to blazes. I don't get a moment of peace. It's absolutely damnable!'

'Very well, monsieur le Président'

The door closed behind the perfect secretary. Lucien immediately emerged from his arm-chair like a hermit-crab from its shell, and continued:

'Monsieur T. will inform you that Cantal lentils are not appreciated in France. Here we only eat the fine large Chile lentils. You will buy the Cantal lentils at two francs fifty the kilo. And you will resell them at one franc the kilo. Only, in addition to the licence to import the cryogen, you will receive, as an additional compensation, a licence to import lentils from Chile. The profit realized by the sale of those lentils will offset part of your loss. . . . As for the rest . . .'

'All right, all right, I understand. Who taught you all this?'

'Nobody, father; I was born with it. But you never look at us children.'

'I shall be on my guard in future. It's staggering. And you are twenty-four!'

'No, no, only twenty-three.'

'Who is this Monsieur T.?'

'You're really in a hurry, father?'

'What does that matter, since I've signed your paper?'

'His name is Trintignan.'

'Right,' said Joseph, pulling out his note-book. 'Tell him to call at the rue du Quatre-Septembre to-morrow morning at nine'

'Oh, I shall be with him.'

'Please yourself, my boy, please yourself. Now listen a moment. Supposing, after all, I didn't give you those thirty thousand francs. You're my son. I keep you. God knows how much you cost me.'

Joseph watched the young man out of the corner of his eye, smiling meanwhile.

'Oh, you can't mean that,' said Lucien, taking out his pocket mirror. 'You'll give them to me right enough'

'You seem pretty certain'

'Why, of course! You know better than any one that one never indulges in hanky-panky with the people one is likely to run up against later on. That will do for to-day. Now I must be off, and you're in a hurry too. By the way, father, why do you waste your time with those old fogies at the Institut? You could be a minister. That would really be something'

Joseph puffed out his cheeks and drew himself up sharply

'A minister! A minister! Don't talk rot. No, my boy, I'm a deputy, that's all, so as to have a footing in the place, a firm footing. But a minister! Do you suppose I've got the time to do duty service from morning to night and from night to morning? No, no, my little man, the ministers are people I make use of when I need them, and then I worry them to death. You know, my boy, it isn't easy to bowl me over: well, you've just done so with this lentil stunt of

yours. Congratulations We'll see how it turns out. But it sounds promising.'

'By the way,' said Lucien, just as he was going out, 'if you want a tip or two for your candidature, especially about Puichaud and Pujol . . . they're awful old dodderers, but I know their sons, they're pals of mine'

'No, no, none of that!' growled Joseph. 'Don't try to get a rise out of me. You're getting beyond yourself. Good God, it's five to five! And that other fellow is waiting for me! Tell the chauffeur I'm coming.'

A minute later, Joseph got into his car, driven this time by the chauffeur with the footman sitting beside him. Blaise Delmuter, standing on the front steps, proceeded to bow a farewell. With his arms glued to his sides, he produced a moderate flexure of the vertebral column in the lumbar region, while locking together all the other joints in his back so that they remained rigid, as if sheathed in lead. Some subordinates bow with the head only, others from the neck. There are others, again, who set in motion every joint of the trunk from cranium to crupper. Blaise Delmuter's bow was a studied bow, the bow of an expert, who was not sparing of the flexure, but who located it definitely among the lowest of the vertebrae.

VI

AFTER the departure of M Joseph Pasquier, Blaise went back into the house, climbed a whole flight of stairs, and turned down a corridor towards his private office, which was next door to the president's.

The house suddenly seemed deserted, and the young man, absorbed in thought, was walking along with his eyes on the ground, when a white shadow emerged from a doorway and advanced to meet him.

'I startled you,' stammered Delphine. 'Please forgive me.'

'Not at all,' said the young man impassively. 'You didn't startle me. I'm not in the least nervous.'

'I know that,' replied the girl hastily. 'I only meant to say . . . May I come into your office?'

'M. le Président doesn't like that sort of thing.'

'Oh, father's out.'

'He's out, but he won't be away more than thirty minutes.'

'Thirty minutes! How can you reckon so exactly?'

'Ten minutes to the avenue Hoche. Ten minutes to return. The call on M. Fougerolle can't last more than ten minutes. M. le Président will be coldly received. Therefore, on his return he'll be in a towering rage. You have been warned.'

'Here, take this,' said the girl, resolutely holding out the little flat box tied up with ribbon which she had had in her hand when she had gone into her father's study an hour earlier. 'Take it. I did it for you.'

'What is it?' asked Blaise, in quiet, guarded tones. 'Another tie? Supposing I don't like it?'

'It's not a tie this time,' murmured Delphine, blushing. 'It's some silk handkerchiefs. I embroidered them myself.'

'So you've been tiring your eyes again.'

'No, no. I wore my glasses.'

'They don't suit you a bit. They make you look like a governess.'

'Then I won't wear them any more.'

There followed a long silence. Delphine stole a glance at the young man, a burning glance, charged with an almost gluttonous tenderness. She said softly:

'You always speak to me so harshly.'

'Nothing of the kind, young lady,' he said, looking bored. 'You are so disobedient.'

He put out his hand unhurriedly and laid it on Delphine's head with a gesture of a sultan. She clutched at it with avidity and began to stroke it awkwardly.

'Last week,' she said, 'father introduced two gentlemen to me, a Belgian and a young man from the Midi, a great soap merchant. No, I won't marry either of them. If I ever do marry any one, you know who it will be.'

The young man vouchsafed a supremely frigid smile.

'I am touched, mademoiselle. But all this is childishness, and dangerous at that; M. le Président would certainly not approve of it.'

'Why do you call father monsieur le Président?'

'Because it pleases him.'

'I 'm twenty-two. I don't have to get father's consent.'

'What rashness! You don't know your father.'

'Oh, my father! What my father thought wouldn't trouble me.'

Delphine blushed, drew back a little, clasping her hands in a gesture of desolation, and murmured:

'You don't care for me. You can't care for me.'

'You 're mistaken,' said the young man with majestic calm 'It's not impossible that some day I might care for you.'

'I don't appeal to you,' wailed Delphine.

'I shouldn't go so far as that. No doubt you are rather too short and heavy.'

'I know, I know,' agreed the girl, with disarming humility.

'I know; father's always reminding me of it.'

'Your father is a connoisseur. May I advise you, little girl, not to cry, for that will tire your eyes even more than fancy-work'

'Oh, don't be afraid,' replied Delphine with strange energy.

'You 've never seen me cry. I never cry.'

'My best congratulations,' said Blaise Delmuter, once again putting out his hand towards the girl's head and giving her hair an almost imperceptible caress.

This somewhat cruel scene was interrupted by the ring of the telephone. Without haste the young man unhooked the receiver and began to listen. Every few seconds he came out with words, bits of sentences: 'Certainly . . . certainly. Ten thousand dollars at once. . . . I'll inform M. le Président. . . . Yes, yes, M. le Président will attend to it without delay. M. le Président will certainly be greatly pleased with the good news, which I shall pass on to him. . . .'

A moment later, Blaise Delmuter replaced the receiver and rose, giving a furtive tug to his well-cut morning coat.

'I'd forgotten,' he said in an imperturbable voice, 'to offer you my congratulations on the Delphine well. A great success.'

'Don't talk about it,' replied the girl gloomily. 'What do you think I care about it?'

'That shows a noble detachment which no doubt your father would find quite incomprehensible. And now, young lady, you'd better get back to your own quarters.'

'I'm going, thanks,' said the child.

And she left the room with a sort of fierce determination, an abruptness in which an attentive onlooker would have recognized something of the legendary virtues of her worthy father, Señor Joseph Pasquier.

Two minutes later, that gentleman tumbled out of his car at the porch of the house and with three or four vigorous shouts immediately summoned his secretary.

Contrary to expectations, the president was not in a vile temper. He seemed pleased. The word 'pleased' seems even rather mild, and it is 'bucked' that the narrator, flinging discretion to the winds, would have been tempted to use at this moment of his chronicle. Disdaining the lift, Joseph Pasquier went up the stairs four at a time, shouting: 'Where is madame?'

'Mme Joseph Pasquier has not yet returned,' replied Blaise Delmuter, who was unable to keep up with his master without some slight disarrangement of the set of his clothes. 'Monsieur le Président,' he continued, 'has perhaps forgotten that he has a box for six booked at the Opéra-Comique.'

'The Opéra-Comique? D'you think I've the time to amuse myself? Give the box to madame.'

'Monsieur le Président knows that he is dining at the Cercle Interallié. The *Quinzaine économique* dinner. In addition, monsieur le Président has two other invitations for this evening, from the Mexican legation and the Gastronomes of the Right Bank.'

'Damn! It's enough to drive one crazy. Tell them to put out my dress clothes. Telephone to the Gastronomes and say there's nothing doing for to-night. If I've time I'll look

in at the Cercle Interallié about half-past ten, in time for the speeches. I'm not down for a speech, am I?'

'No, monsieur le Président, not to-night. But the typescript of to-morrow's speech is on monsieur le Président's desk, in triplicate.'

'Thanks, young Blaise. You know about Fougerolle, well, everything went off capitally. . . . You were going to say something; you've got your mouth open.'

'I wanted to say that M. Obregon's secretary has telephoned again. The Delphine well will yield more than eight hundred barrels. Only M. Lopez de Quevedo insists on an immediate advance of ten thousand dollars.'

'They are the limit!' exclaimed Joseph, flinging his arms skyward. 'Dollars! Always dollars! As if dollars grew on every bush! To make anything out of the first sales of oil requires the combined skill of a Chinese acrobat and a shop-keeper's accountant. So they want me to go to Mexico, do they? Well, I shall end by going to Mexico, just a flying visit to give them what for. Dollars! Dollars! Of course I've got dollars. The collapse of the franc is practically inevitable, what with all these Fourdillats and people of that kidney. I've got dollars, yes. I'm not one of your sleepy-heads, your improvident idiots. But if things go on like this they'll gobble up all my dollars. You'll call up Obregon directly, in a moment, while I'm in my bath. I was just telling you that Faugerolle was more than decent. . . . But I see you've got something else to tell me. Yes, you have. Out with it, my boy.'

'M. Simionescault is putting up for the Institut in opposition to monsieur le Président. His candidature is now official.'

Joseph flushed suddenly. Against the rush of hot blood his eyebrows stood out whiter than ever, while the lobes of his ears assumed the hue of ripe aubergines.

'Simionescault!' he yelled. 'A *métèque*! A swindler! A creature whose grandparents were shepherds in Bessarabia. Naturalized only two generations ago! Nothing whatever

to do with the Escaut. The name was Simionesco in 1880. Moreover, as you know, he's very ill, hanging on by a thread, in fact. And he is standing against me! All right. I'll beat him, I'll beat him. After all, it'll be rather funny. . . . I was telling you that Faugerolle was most obliging, contrary to all expectations. I must add that when I arrived at the house everything was in confusion. There was a leak of water in the hall and they hadn't a stop-cock. At first I thought he was going to ask me to postpone the appointment. He was there himself, hands all filthy, with the maid and the swabs. Their plumber couldn't come and the *concierge* was out shopping. It was ludicrous. I took their telephone and called my plumber, my own plumber Villard. And then I got hold of a hammer and an odd bit of wood and hammered up the pipe. He was staggered, was old Faugerolle. He realized he was in the presence of a real man, a man of resource. Villard was on the spot in less than five minutes and I gave some instructions. The old fellow didn't know how to thank me. He'll vote for me all right. You see, young Blaise, I've always treated my opponents like beasts of the chase, that is to say as people you must first run down and then vanquish in a set fight. But with these fellows of the Institut you've got to adopt entirely different methods. Some days I find this amusing; more often it disgusts me. . . . First of all I'm going to wash my hands. My sleeves are all wet. That's from the leak at Faugerolle's. . . . And then I'll have a bath. Ah, here you are at last, Hélène. . . . Blaise, tell them to turn on my bath and leave me with madame.'

Joseph had taken off his coat and slipped out his cuff-links. He was now rolling up his shirt-sleeves, revealing a pair of powerful forearms.

'Hélène,' he said, 'you are going to the Opéra-Comique. There's a box holding six. I can't possibly go. I'm supposed to be dining out at three places. I don't know how I'm going to manage. Ask the children if they'd like to go.'

'I don't think so,' replied Mme Pasquier senior. 'Finette is spending the evening with her uncle Laurent. Lucien's

gone out without even telling us where. Jeanpi is alone in his room. He ought to see the doctor, Joseph. I'm rather worried about him. He's growing thin. He cries like a child at the slightest thing, and he's no longer a child. You are rather rough with him, Joseph.'

'Hélène,' replied President Pasquier, 'if I listened to you I should turn that boy into a milksop, a mere cissy. Excuse me, I must change my shirt. As for the Opéra-Comique, do as you like, if you're keen on going.'

'I'll go with some friends.'

With lowered head Joseph took a few steps about the room. He seemed embarrassed.

'What friends do you think of going with, my dear?' he asked.

'I haven't made up my mind yet. Perhaps with Ricamus. I'll telephone presently.'

'Indeed? Indeed?' said Joseph between his teeth. 'You're going out again with that fellow! I don't like him. I think I've told you so already.'

'You have, but I can't see your reason. He has published a splendid article about you with some fine photographs of Montredon. He's the most intelligent of Lucien's friends. Personally I find him charming.'

'But that way he has of addressing you as Mamouche or Mamichka, or whatever it is. . . .'

'Well, what about it?'

'It's most unsuitable, Hélène. My dear, you're just the opposite of . . . in short, it doesn't suit you at all, and I don't much care about it. It's childish. Need I say more?'

'How strange you are, Joseph! If you weren't such a bear, that boy, who is so witty and full of imagination, would probably call you something of the kind, Papichka or Papiche.'

'He'd better not try it on! No, thank you, I've no use for such familiarities. I've said all I have to say on this subject. Do you wear your emeralds every time you go out? What an idea!'

'If I've got them,' said Hélène coolly, 'it's not to keep them locked up in a safe, but to enjoy them when I please.'

Joseph shook his head, restive and displeased. H  l  ne was covered with jewels. For a long time she had set her face against this particular kind of extravagance. Joseph had forced it on her since the war with incessant repetitions of the argument: 'It's a form of wealth that takes up very little space. And if we lose everything, perhaps we shan't lose that.' At last beguiled, at last persuaded, H  l  ne had acquired a taste for jewellery and gems which was fast becoming a craze.

'Who sent the box?' she continued.

'The Marigots,' said Joseph with a shrug. 'They're pleasant enough,' he quickly added, 'but *nouveaux riches*. Now please excuse me, I've got to have my bath and then get into my evening things.'

Joseph kept the expression *nouveaux riches* for those whose success had come since the war. As for those who, like himself, had made their money in the early years of the century, he looked upon them as rich folk of the old stock, as nobility dating almost from the crusades, as people who consequently could be regarded as eminently sound and reliable.

H  l  ne went off whistling an American dance tune. As a rule, women do not find whistling an easy accomplishment, but Mme Pasquier senior carried it off with virtuosity and considerable success.

Joseph went into the bathroom, from which there soon came a sound suggestive of a buffalo plunging into a river. He heaved great sighs, grumbling about the towels, the taps, and the soap. He had not been in the bath more than a minute when Blaise knocked sharply at the door, opened it a little way, and began:

'M. Trintignan will call to-morrow morning at nine with M. Lucien Pasquier. The appointment has been confirmed. M. Obregon requests that instructions for the payment of the ten thousand dollars shall be given at the latest before ten o'clock to-morrow morning. . . . M. le Pr  sident de la Chambre invites M. Joseph Pasquier to lunch on Tuesday next, one o'clock, at the Tour d'Argent.'

Joseph shouted, gave orders, sent cascades of water in all directions, and wallowed about like some aquatic monster. Blaise disappeared, to return almost immediately saying: 'The rue du Quatre-Septembre is asking for three appointments. M. Mairesse-Miral wishes to see monsieur le Président tomorrow morning, nine o'clock, at the rue de Pétrograd, with the contractors. The Wagons-lits have telephoned about the single sleeper; Thursday night at ten I'll go and fetch the tickets. . . .'

Such was Joseph's life in the spring of 1925

There are those who, to raise their fortunes, cause great industrial cities to spring from the soil, erect immense buildings, workshops, warehouses, towers, and railways, gather together and control intractable hordes of workmen, and live night and day in a state of alert on their hard-won battleground, amid the panting of forges and under a canopy of pestiferous exhalations from furnaces and coke ovens.

There are those who own, or lease on onerous terms, great agricultural plains. They have to deal with cunning, obstinate farmers; with tribes of sun-scorched labourers; with great herds of cattle, every one of them valuable but all liable at any moment to contract some disease and die off like flies; with complicated machines for ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and separating the grain. Their lives are encumbered with cares and lie at the mercy of sun and rain. To escape failure they have to become chemists, astronomers, biologists, and what else? Economists, without a doubt, and, in a word, wizards.

There are those who produce nothing themselves, neither spring-mattresses, nor looking-glasses, nor kitchen utensils, nor yet rye, beets, and colza, but they find it advantageous to act as traffickers for others, to transport across the surface of this miserable and miraculous planet all that is torn from the bowels of the earth, all that is ingeniously fashioned in workshops, all that is coaxed day by day from the soil by the obstinate efforts of man. These people own innumerable lorries, barges, trains, iron vessels, ranged like cucumbers in the docks

of the great ports. It is they who battle with tempests at sea and engage all the year round in horrific contests with the insurance companies.

There are those in fine who content themselves with selling what the others have produced and transported. Even these wily folk are sometimes obliged to jettison three or four thousand tons of oranges that have been attacked in storage by mildew, or to get rid at a loss of fifty thousand cast-iron kitchen ranges because the pattern has gone out of date since a new model was put on the world markets by a rival firm.

For a long time, ten or fifteen years perhaps, Joseph had astutely managed to avoid all the pitfalls of chance. But the successful man runs formidable risks, and Joseph's success had really been prodigious.

VII

*Laurent Pasquier to Mme Cécile Pasquier, Pennsylvania Hotel,
New York.*

DEAR CÉCILE,

Your letter gladdened our hearts. Jacqueline read it out to me. I ought to write: 'read it out to us,' for Michel was listening open-mouthed, as he does when you play softly, very softly to the little fellow and no doubt to your ghostly familiars as well.

I am happy to hear that your fourth visit to America is bringing you new friends, happy to know that those thousands, those millions of men who live far from us and of whom we know hardly anything can love what we love and can hold communion with us in sharing our admiration of the mighty men of genius to whom you have dedicated your life. Thus you bring me tangible evidence, sister, of a certain form of that 'universal human,' my belief in which I might sometimes be tempted to abandon. My grateful thanks for this deed of charity.

You ask for news of your 'own people.' Judging by what you say sometimes, Cécile dear, I imagine that your 'own people,' the real ones, are called Bach and Debussy, Mozart, Handel, or Fauré. But no, it's of us others that you wish to have news. And it's precisely about us others that I wanted to speak to you. This evening at last I can count on the hour or two of leisure that I need in order to let myself go and pick up the threads of our last talk.

I think I notice in all your letters, Cécile dear, a certain anxiety and even a touch of self-reproach with regard to mother. Let me set your mind at rest on both scores. It was I who dissuaded mother from the plan she had made of living alone in their little *appartement* in the rue Pasteur. Seeing the state she is now in you will agree that I was right. Naturally I invited her to come and live with me, first because I should be pleased to have her, and secondly because I couldn't very well see what else could be done. In the first days of her widowhood mother couldn't go anywhere but to you, Cécile, or to me. But you are always travelling; your house is shut up for a great part of the year. The problem was solved as soon as set, and mother came to me. At first I looked upon this as the simplest thing in the world; the idea of possible complications never occurred to me. Well, well! It seems nothing is simple when the Pasquier clan is concerned. I'm becoming aware, from innumerable little signs, that Ferdinand and Claire are anything but pleased. You, dear Cécile, have perhaps understood, like me, that Ferdinand and Claire were from the very first obstinately resolved to allow no one—not even poor mother—to intrude on the privacy of their absurd domestic duet. On no account would they accept a responsibility of this kind. The idea that there was somebody else ready and glad to shoulder it ought to have been a relief to them. Not a bit of it! I really believe it is causing them more uneasiness than relief. You can't have failed to notice that there's a coolness between the Ferdinands and me. It annoys them intensely to see me doing the very thing they feared they might

feel obliged to do themselves. I see very little of Ferdinand, except when they are changing their doctor and he comes to me for advice; for on that matter he and Claire continue to consult me. They are a perfect pair of *malades imaginaires*—a case, by the way, that Molière never even dreamt of. I went round there last week with some drugs which they had asked me to get them at a reduced price. I arrived early; they had only just got out of bed. Through the partition wall I could hear Claire wailing: ‘Oh dear! I do feel so bad!’ and Ferdi replying: ‘Feel bad, do you? And what about me?’ Things being so, they ought to hate each other. Not at all; they play up to each other, listen to each other, back each other up. . . .

Poor mother! In the old days when we were very little she used to say to Mlle Bailleul: ‘If Raymond goes to hell, I would much rather go with him. I’d rather do that than go to heaven, where I should be all alone. . . .’ Alas, father is dead—and I don’t believe he’s in hell: he’s pitched a tale to St. Peter and wangled a special pass out of him, as he always did—father is dead, and poor old mother lives on. We always thought that without him she’d be completely lost and quite unable to go on living. Well, he’s been dead three years, and here she is still, waiting like someone left behind by the boat on the quay. She is altering considerably. She walks with great difficulty, uttering from time to time little whinnying, quavering moans. It isn’t three children that Line and I have got, but four. Morning and evening, Line combs, washes, and powders her, pays her all sorts of little attentions, and provides her with all sorts of little bandages, with a cheerful dexterity, a sweetness and simplicity in which is infused no small measure of imagination. Hélène, who happened to be present on one of these occasions, said quite simply: ‘One can see you love that sort of thing, my dear. With you it’s more than a vocation, it’s a passion.’ That day Hélène went off quite reassured. She says to any one who will listen. ‘The Laurents could very well engage a nurse. We should all agree. But Jacqueline adores looking

after old people and children. It's a hobby with her. And really she does it very well.'

While Line is plying the sponge and the powder puff, mother, if she is well awake, tells for the thousandth time the stories of her life. It would be wrong to suppose that she always tells them the same way. Take, for example, the portrait she draws of father—certainly a surprising one. 'He was handsome'—yes, of course he was. 'He was noble, unselfish, and'—hold on tight, Cécile, dear!—'he was virtuous, conscientious, and faithful. . . .' When she is alone with Line, she thus makes a sincere effort to transform him into a legendary figure, but if I happen to be present she is more on her guard, more careful in her choice of epithets. She would like to obliterate all memories of past grievances. Then I look the other way, partly so as not to embarrass her, partly because I haven't yet got used to this sublime imposture.

In the evening, when she is tired, she suddenly grows very old. She goes back to her early days. If at such moments she uses the expression 'at home,' I understand that, surprisingly, she is no longer referring to her married life, to her home as wife and mother, to that tempestuous period that lasted more than half a century. No, at such moments 'at home' means the house where she was brought up, the home of her uncles the Delahaus. This, I say, is a symptom of great fatigue. For the rest of the day she fills to admiration the role of queen mother. She plays the Pasquier with such fine intolerance that we others, inheritors of the name, appear like amateurs, and feeble ones at that.

Every time Joseph comes to see us, which, I may remark, is not seldom, he finds something unpleasant to say to me about the way mother is lodged and treated. One day I replied coldly: 'If you think you can do better there's nothing to hinder you; you have the room, the staff, and the money.' It was just a burst of temper, Cécile dear. Not for worlds would I let poor mother become a member of Joseph's household. It was, as I say, a momentary outburst, and Joseph took it very badly. 'Think of what you're saying,' he

growled. 'With the life I lead it would be completely impossible. Business! Receptions! The kind of company I entertain! Poor mother is hardly presentable, and she would be lost in the midst of all that. Besides, Hélène has her good qualities, but she doesn't possess your wife's special aptitudes. Apart from that, she's the mother of us all, and it seems to me I have a perfect right to give my opinion and make remarks.'

I made no reply. After all, what could I say? Joseph is like that. Every quarter he comes to see me, to set mother's affairs in order, as he puts it. That means he tries to get a little money out of me. He has a wonderful store of excuses and pretexts. We have to pay insurance, pay the lawyer, settle the recurring account of the firm that built and looks after the monument at Nesles. Father left behind him here and there some not inconsiderable debts which are constantly coming to light. Joseph passes me the documents and growls: 'As you've taken charge of her you'll have to see to this. But don't mention it to mother. She certainly deserves to be spared. Taft! Calm!'

Reading this, Cécile dear, you may suppose I'm feeling bitter against Joseph. No; honestly no. To be sure, Joseph takes up a good deal of my thoughts. Sometimes he makes me laugh, and there are occasions when he puts me in a rage. But I have succeeded in banishing him from my inner life.

I must go on talking about him, however. I was thinking of him when I began this letter, for I'm rather worried about him, Cécile dear. I refuse to be made miserable by Joseph, or on his account; yet in spite of all I could never look upon him with cold indifference. The time is past when a retort of his would throw me off my balance and plunge me into despair. But I still have to be perpetually on my guard, protecting myself. Sometimes I tell myself that the simplest thing to do would be to stop seeing him and do my best to forget him altogether. But that is impossible so long as we still have mother with us. And even afterwards . . . I can't tell what my duty will be. I have the greatest aversion to family squabbles. But as it is equally repugnant to me to

pretend or equivocate I must perforce accept the challenge and do battle. And then there's Hélène. Twenty-five years ago she was a sympathetic, intelligent girl. I felt something akin to love for her. The change, summarized in a flash, is pretty frightful. You can't live with Joseph for five-and-twenty years and go unscathed. Hélène has acquired all Joseph's faults, and they have taken root so firmly in her character that one sometimes asks oneself whether he is solely responsible for the shape her life has taken. Hélène, to-day . . . No, I'm not going to talk about Hélène. There would really be too many things to tell you. And I should also have to talk about their three children; about Finette, who is rather pathetic but also rather secretive and of whom we see a good deal; about Jean-Pierre, whom I like and take an interest in, and who must be pretty miserable among all these crazy people, about Lucien . . . No, no, we'll leave Lucien aside for to-night.

Joseph came to see me last week. I told you in my last letter how he had sent me a note three or four weeks ago about his candidature for the Institut de France. I'll tell you later about this famous candidature. Meanwhile, let's go back to the beginning of the conversation. I heard a ring and at once I thought: There's Joseph. Our bell is an ordinary electric affair. With the old-fashioned bell-pull it was fairly possible to guess the identity of the visitor beforehand. With the modern device it's very difficult, though not absolutely impossible, to form an opinion on the subject. When we lived at the Quai de Montebello we had a press-bell, and in spite of all that is neutral and coldly impersonal in such contraptions, I sometimes achieved a successful diagnosis. At the Place du Panthéon our bell—perhaps you've never noticed it, my dear, absent-minded Cécile—is an electric one. Well, I generally manage to get some idea of the appearance and disposition of the he or she who is standing at my door. I say to myself: 'He's shy,' or 'He's an original', sometimes even, 'He's brazen-faced.' That day I didn't hesitate for a moment, I said: 'It's Joseph!' And of course it was Joseph.

As he came in he said:

'I know you don't go to the laboratory on Thursdays. So I've come to find you and carry you off.'

I began by refusing point-blank. Whenever Joseph approaches me I know that he's intending to take something from me. In the old days it was money. Now I'm on my guard about money; so now he takes my time, my attention, my admiration—yes, he will have admiration. In short, he always levies his tax. So I immediately declared that I had a lot of work to do and that I intended spending the afternoon at home. Quoth Joseph:

'No, Laurent, you're coming with me; we are going to the cemetery at Nesles.' And, to cut off my retreat, he added: 'It's already too long since you were there last.'

I shrugged my shoulders, not without annoyance.

'Sorry, Joseph, I don't happen to have a car.'

'That's because you won't have one,' he growled. 'Nowadays a car is within the means of everybody. Well, I have a car, so I've come to fetch you. It'll take us two hours and a half, there and back, and we shall have done no more than our duty.'

Joseph everlastingly talks about duty. Big words have no terrors for him.

'Get ready,' he continued. 'I'm going to see mother.'

I was quite ready, so I followed him into mother's room. The etiquette of these visits hardly ever varies. Joseph comes in, and mother exclaims: 'Why, it's Joseph!' He kisses the old lady and sits down facing her. He pats the back of her hand in a casual, good-natured sort of way. Doing his best to soften his gruff voice he delivers a series of affectionate insipidities, and pretty speeches worthy of a village policeman. He falls back on the old jokes of our childhood. He scolds: 'If you don't take your medicine, mother, I shall turn fireman or sailor.' Mother plays up. 'No, no, my little Joseph,' she exclaims in terrified tones. 'Not that! It's too dangerous.' Then he roars with laughter. 'Don't be afraid, mother. Neither a fireman's nor a sailor's life for me; the pay isn't good enough.'

Mother gazes with tender admiration at her beloved eldest son, her dear little boy, and the little boy is a hefty monster with hair turning white, florid complexion, hands like a gorilla's, a tweed suit, enormous crêpe-soled shoes, and a rosette of the Legion of Honour as big as a tomato, with the wide silver *trottoir* indicating its grade. *Trottoir* is his own word.

You will think, Cécile dear, that I'm being hard on him. Perhaps so, but when we got into the car after that visit to mother he began to irritate me, exasperate me even, until I bitterly regretted having consented to accompany him on this commemorative expedition. When we drove off, my normal feelings towards Joseph were in abatement. In fact, I felt quite tolerant. Unfortunately, he started off at once on what he has the impudence to call intellectual problems.

All his life Joseph has shown the most offensive contempt for the things, the men, the ideas to which we others have devoted our best efforts. Now that he is by way of being a great art collector and author of three or four books—you know it's not young Blaise Delmutter who writes Joseph's books; Delmutter only writes his speeches; I don't know who does the books—now that he has got it into his head not only to be one of the richest men in France, which ought to be enough for him, but also to pose as a thinker, a man of ideas; now that he has hit on the notion, which I won't call absurd but rather most audacious and astute, of offering himself for election to the Institut—can you imagine it? Joseph Pasquier a member of the Institut!—now Joseph discourses upon intellectual matters, upon art, science, and philosophy, in a manner fit to humiliate us all. He has a way of getting hold of words whose real meaning he hardly understands, and flourishing them with an effrontery which ought to make me smile instead of causing me acute embarrassment. He says: 'My children have been brought up to respect spiritual values.' Then I drop my eyes and turn my head away as if I were ashamed. And so in fact I am.

However, he drives his car with savage skill. I know very little about motoring matters, and yet, whenever I see a man

at the wheel of his car, it seems to me that I can penetrate to the secret depths of his nature. Joseph's driving shows him up conspicuously as very brutal, very egotistic, very adroit, and, in spite of all, extraordinarily naïve, as your artful dodgers and professional humbugs always are.

On that day I had no intention of quarrelling with Joseph. I made sincere efforts to turn the talk, to deaden my reflexes, to become absorbed in a mental lethargy. It's an old device of mine, which Joseph is well acquainted with, and which sometimes only succeeds in increasing his exasperation.

To reach the cemetery at Nesles, we passed the Baudoins' house, where, in 1921, Suzanne made that mysterious visit of which she never speaks, and which, from the little I can make out about it, appears to have had a profoundly saddening effect on her. Joseph vouchsafed a grumpy remark or two: 'Look, that's where those harum-scarum people live. . . . At first I thought Suzanne was going to marry the eldest son. A painter of talent, but doesn't sell. . . . And then, Suzanne has her career to consider.'

He went on growling between his teeth. But already we were approaching the cemetery. No sooner had we reached the tomb than Joseph began to play the detective, as I might say. 'Ah, that's odd,' he said, 'the Ferdinands have been here. Yes, to be sure, that's their vase, and that plant over there is quite in their style—couldn't have come from any one else. That's my basket. Flowers from La Châtaignerie or Montredon. I gave the order. I can't think where that geranium plant came from. . . . Strange, strange. . . .'

I knew where the geranium came from, or at least I could give a shrewd guess. But I was paying very little attention to what Joseph was saying; in fact, I wasn't paying any attention at all. I was deep in my thoughts. Actually I was thinking of father with a deep desire to do him justice, with a sincere and heartfelt longing to forget and forgive, and even with something akin to gratitude. I detest lies and legends. So I was making a sincere effort to come to terms with the facts and with my memories.

Unfortunately Joseph began to speak. He finds it difficult to refrain from speech-making on solemn occasions. So he embarked on a monologue, and what he was saying, after traversing a thick layer of reverie, at last reached my ears.

'Look, Laurent,' he was saying. 'Our place is already marked out there. Some day our names will be engraved on that marble slab. On some future day, still, I hope, far distant, you and I, Laurent, will lie alongside that great gentleman. . . . I say you and I; I put you first out of politeness.' (I would have you notice, Cécile dear, that nowadays Joseph, like most of our contemporaries, sprinkles his 'greats' with a lavish hand. As soon as he's on familiar terms with some quite ordinary individual, you hear him say: 'He's a great gentleman,' or 'He's a great fellow.' No fine distinctions with Joseph: on one side the swine and the swindlers, on the other the 'great so-and-sos'). He continued in his grave-side voice, the voice he assumes when he puts in an appearance at the funeral of one of his future colleagues of the Institut: 'Think for a moment, Laurent, of all that we owe, every one of us, to that wonderful man. Ah, yes, a great personality.'

For Joseph talks *journalèse*. He calls persons personalities. He thinks it sounds better, grander.

I said nothing in reply. I'm well aware of what we all owe to father, I know it from within, and I regard Joseph's homilies as altogether superfluous. As I refused to utter he began one of his harangues, not without first casting some searching glances around him. I couldn't make out whether he wanted to be sure the cemetery was empty, or whether he wasn't rather making use of a professional trick to gather a possible audience. 'No,' he was saying, 'you'll never guess how much trouble I took to get it for him. . . .' I was wondering what this statement referred to, when Joseph enlarged upon it: 'The Legion of Honour, Laurent—he deserved it more than many others, he certainly deserved it more than you or I.' When Joseph exercises the virtue of humility he always makes sure that he isn't alone. He went on, talking

louder and louder: 'Ah, I put in some hard work to get him his ribbon! And yet he has gone from us without having reaped this just reward. Life is bitter. No matter; the time will come when Dr. Raymond Pasquier will be recognized as one of the greatest philosophers of our time. I have read his memoirs, his private papers. Admirable! And what purity of heart! What an example of repentance, yes, and of noble virtue! Mother is quite right; if father in his young days sinned at times out of mere flightiness, in his later years he gave us a magnificent example to follow. You must remember that, Laurent!'

I had heard the beginning of this oration with an indifferent, even a deliberately inattentive ear. But the end began to stir my feelings. Father! Well, he was what he was. With time, I feel that his image, the picture of him that I bear in my heart, is beginning to soften, even to sweeten. It's more than likely that some day it will be quite attractive, even charming. Better leave it in peace, then, and not attempt to touch it up with falsehoods. With mother it's different, and I have no objection to her transforming alchemy. But Joseph! What can be the aim of this incurable chatterer in thus attempting to fake up our memories? As he was challenging me to bear witness, I answered somewhat brutally. 'I live on good terms with my father's shade. I consider it most unseemly to represent him as a plaster saint, and he certainly wouldn't thank you for it if he could hear you.'

In spite of myself, I must have spoken rather harshly, for Joseph, feeling that we were on the verge of a squabble, said 'Let's get out of the cemetery. If you must express yourself so disrespectfully, at least let it not be here.' Disrespectfully! You must agree, Cécile, that it was enough to make one lose one's temper. We walked out of the cemetery and went along the cart-track that goes up to the plateau. I could no longer contain myself. It was perhaps unseemly, but lying is not to be tolerated even in the presence of the dead. We walked on a few paces and then I told Joseph some things he ought to know, now that he is beginning to lie without

restraint if not without motive. I ask myself why you and I took such pains to keep these things from him. Here is the gist of what I said to him; it's better that you should know, in case he ever speaks to you about it.

'Joseph, you were in Egypt or Syria or wherever it was at the time father died. He didn't die in his bed in the boulevard Pasteur, as you fancy, Joseph, but in the rue du Cotentin, where Marie Puech, the second of his mistresses, was living. He had installed Marie Puech in the rue du Cotentin so as not to have too far to walk. He had installed her there, a couple of minutes away from his house, even at the risk of awakening mother's suspicions. But mother never saw more than she wished to see. Marie Puech is not the one he went off with to Algeria in 1914. . . . No, no, Marie Puech was one of his two regular lady-loves. . . . The other was always Laura Lescure; most probably that potted geranium on his grave came from her. What you don't know, Joseph, you who always know everything, is that we were warned in time, Cécile and I, by Marie Puech herself. We went to the rue Cotentin. . . . Cécile, who never drives her car herself but has a driving licence, came with me, at night. And, with the help of the *concei*ge at the rue du Cotentin and of Marie Puech, we carried out a terrible task. We wrapped father's dead body in an old overcoat and carried it down into the car. Cécile was shaking all over while she drove, and I sat next to the corpse. . . .' You must forgive me for telling him all this, Cécile. For these are facts that, as I said before, Joseph must be told, now that it's all over, now that it's in the limbo of the past. He must be told these facts, since he can't keep himself from fabricating romances and fables and legends.

He listened, head down, furiously angry. I told him how we had carried up the corpse to its bed, to their bed in the boulevard Pasteur. What followed, that is to say, the official lie, he knew: that father had been found dead in the street twenty paces from his house.

To think that mother has never inquired by what *strange* chance you, Cécile, happened to be on the spot, and what is

more, with your car! Well, Joseph listened in a suppressed fury and lost no time in dodging the issue. He burst into reproaches: 'Why didn't you inform me of all this at the time? I am the eldest. I ought to have been the first to be informed. In any case I shall question Cécile!' So you are warned, Cécile. Be on your guard. He had assumed his examining magistrate's voice and I could foresee the moment when he would ask me to produce accounts.

I should have refused to give them to him. All of a sudden I was very sad and very weary. I was not at all sure that I had acted wisely in telling him this story, not sure whether I had not just yielded to bitterness and spite, not sure that I had not done something perfectly useless. For, Cécile dear, I say it again, I am at peace with my father's shade, and in memory I love him and even respect him. I don't respect those faults of his which made us so unhappy, but I do respect what was worthy in him.

We got back into the car and began to speed up. On the hill we met the offal merchant's car. It's an ancient, ramshackle Ford. It pitched and rolled. In it were bullocks' lungs filled with air which swung right and left with the jolting of the car. It was at once macabre and comic. Joseph made the offal merchant stop; the man is a town councillor or something of the kind, and he plunged into an interminable conversation. Joseph had hopes of shining in the land of his ancestors. Well, he has succeeded. Everybody knows him. They would like to elect him mayor. He declines as yet for reasons which he keeps to himself. But he will take the chair at the prize-giving and he will make a speech. He makes speeches almost daily. He gives very little money. Next to nothing. But he is always ready to make a speech.

He insisted on going round by La Châtaigneraie, to speak to the fellow he calls his major-domo. There we wasted more than a quarter of an hour. He then wanted to stop at Montredon and I had the greatest trouble to prevent him from doing so. Yet he was perfectly well aware that I was in a hurry to be home and get back to work.

In the car, during the three-quarters of an hour of the trip, he suddenly became gloomy. He spoke of his candidature for the Institut. It appears that Simionescault, who is an economist of note, is to be the rival candidate. Joseph openly refers to him as a blackguard, a charlatan, and—here I don't quite follow—a *faisan*. He is planning to get a press campaign started against him, not in his own paper the *Moniteur*, but in other papers in which he has interests. Then, too, he says: 'Simionescault is a very sick man. He'll probably snuff out. So then?' Then he adds with a smile: 'As for me, whenever a fellow gets in my way, I immediately think to myself: "He's going to die." And the funny part of it is that quite often the fellows do die. I've always had luck on my side' (*sic*). He adds: 'The real genius is the man who keeps out of my way'

He talked without a smile of his books, of his collections. And suddenly, full of gloom, he exclaimed: 'Oh, if you others think it's any fun to have money in these days!' He was quiet for two or three minutes and then he resumed his lament 'People like you, just because they have difficulties with microbes, seem to imagine that the path of people like me is strewn with roses. Well, they've no idea what it's really like.' Then suddenly, though I hadn't said a word: 'Money! You say money! But I'm a saint, a martyr to money. Don't laugh. You find it in your heart to laugh? Then you don't realize that I never have a good time, never have any respite, and that eventually it will be the death of me!'

As I still held my peace, he went on: 'In the days gone by, oh, I don't deny it, I used to think that money was immortal. But no, not a bit of it, money is not immortal. Money dies for the slightest thing. And one must everlastingly be nursing it against death'

A moment later he added: 'I'm tired.'

'There's a word that father would never have uttered,' I replied.

He shrugged his shoulders.

A little later he resumed his lamentations. Then he burst out laughing and spoke of oil. It seems that his oil business in Mexico is on the way to develop in triumphal fashion. 'Triumphal' was the word he used. He spoke with lyrical enthusiasm. His mood of depression had passed. He interlarded all his speeches with his pet formulas: 'I know what I 'm saying. . . . I know what I 'm doing. . . . Where there 's a will there 's a way,' etc. He couldn't restrain himself from telling me about his affairs and ambitions. It 's quite possible that he will be elected a member of the Institut. Then at least that business will be settled. Besides that, he is already chairman of at least twenty societies. He is a deputy for Paris. At his house in the rue Taitbout he deals with any number of business affairs, each one more involved than the others. The greater part of the rest are dealt with in his offices at the rue du Quatre-Septembre. But what you don't know is something Lucien told me the other day, that Joseph has also got a sort of small shabby office in the rue de Pétrograd, where the unspeakable Maitresse-Miral is installed, and where he receives the sort of people who might be shocked by the luxurious display at the rue Taitbout. . . .

Cécile dear, it's time I closed this wandering letter. I 'm worried about Joseph, in spite of his present successes, and that is really all I wanted to tell you. But I 've been letting myself go unrestrainedly as I used to do when writing to my poor dear Justin. Think of it, Cécile, next month—15th July—it will be seven years since Justin died in Champagne during the second battle of the Marne, died for the peace and safety of all of us. Died to secure Joseph's fortune and triumph.

Au revoir, sister mine. Play for me, some evening at one of your concerts, Mozart's Rondo in A minor, the familiar one of our childhood. Play it for me alone and I shall hear you.

Yours

LAURENT

VIII

No sooner has it crossed the rue de la Victoire and the rue de Chateaudun than the rue Taitbout begins to be aware of the Montmartre hill and bounds forward to climb it. Less fortunate than its neighbours, who in one breath reach the boulevard de Clichy or the boulevard Rochechouart, the rue Taitbout falls in with the rue d'Aumale and immediately gives up its adventurous quest. In this latter part of its course the rue Taitbout is able to forget the hurly-burly of its early beginnings, the feverish excitement of the boulevards, the dare-devil cyclists who at certain hours besiege the office of the *Temps*, the shops, the bars, and the roaring crowd of traffic. All of a sudden it becomes provincial. It is lined with gloomy mansions, smoke-begrimed buildings, walls, and gardens affording glimpses of green clumps of trees.

Standing at the window, Jean-Pierre could see first of all the courtyard with its damp pavement on which two dogs were disporting themselves, then the gateway and the deserted street. Suddenly he caught sight of a cochineal-coloured taxi stopping at the edge of the pavement. Mme Pasquier senior stepped out of it, slammed the door with a gesture which even at a distance suggested nervous irritation, paid the fare, dismissed the driver, and crossed the court with a quick step.

Jean-Pierre stirred from his torpor and looked about him anxiously. This room, so spacious and bright, in which he was standing was his mother's bedroom. He had come here for sanctuary at the end of an exhausting day, seeking aid and protection. Finding the room empty he had lingered, his thoughts wandering, his heart heavy with depression, his face against the window-pane on which, despite the oppressive warmth of the evening, his breath deposited a quivering mist.

Hélène opened the door and came into the room with a rush. She was wearing, slightly askew on her cropped hair, a small *cloche* hat which she pulled off hastily and flung down on the

dressing-table. Her face then revealed itself as deeply flushed, badly powdered, with fine drops of sweat standing on the wings of the nose and on the temples. With the same impatient movement with which she had taken off her hat, she ripped off the jacket, that straight-cut, double-breasted, masculine jacket. Suddenly she became aware of Jean-Pierre standing by the bathroom door, looking worried and perplexed.

'Hallo, you there, Jeanpi?' she exclaimed. 'What are you doing here, my pet?'

The tone was, as usual, affectionate and playful, but H  l  ne was making a great effort to regain her composure: she was still breathing too fast. Two or three wrinkles ruffled that lovely brow, once so smooth and clear. Patches of red came and went on her throat. She hesitated a moment, then she went up to Jean-Pierre and planted a light kiss on his cheek. It was a kiss that was meant to be merely fleeting, but the boy with a quick impulse pulled her to him and began to whisper.

'You know I've been up for my written,' he said.

'You have. It was to-day, then?'

'Of course, mother, I told you last night. I told you several times.'

'You're pleased, then?'

He paused a full minute before replying

'Pleased? No. Not at all pleased.'

'Poor Jeanpi!' said H  l  ne with a friendly shrug of the shoulders. 'And what was it that went wrong?'

The boy had taken out of his pocket a crumpled sheet of paper.

'It's the translation, as usual,' he stammered. 'I showed the text to Blaise, who is still pretty good at that sort of thing. He picked out my mistakes; there are any number of them. "Senserunt hostes de profecutione." Apparently that means: "The enemy became aware of the retreat." But I put something quite different. I don't even remember what.'

'Poor Jeanpi!' repeated Mme Pasquier senior absently. 'Well, well, you'll try again in October. After all, it will only be the fourth attempt.'

So saying she made a resolute attempt to disengage herself from the boy, who was still clasping her round the neck. It was he who suddenly moved away. He seemed to notice an unaccustomed scent on his mother's face, and without appearing too obviously to do so, he sniffed it with a startled nostril. At last he said:

'What's that scent, mother?'

She turned away sharply and answered in a casual tone. 'That's my new powder. Don't you like it?'

He shook his head slowly.

'No, no, I don't know that scent. No, I don't like it.'

'Jeanpi,' said Mme Pasquier, moving away, 'you must leave me for a moment, my pet. I must change.'

She bent down to untie her shoes, an action which sent a rush of blood to her face. The boy standing before her said in a faint voice:

'You're going out again?'

'Again? Why "again"?'

Without making any reply to this laughing question, he went on:

'Won't you have dinner with me?'

'No, Petrouchka, I'm dining out. I'm dining at a friend's house.'

'Don't call me Petrouchka,' he protested.

'And why not? It's rather sweet.'

'No, no, mother, Petrouchka, Mamichka, I don't like such names!'

She stood up, tossed her head in tender mockery, and approached the boy with intent to push him towards the door. He was now lifeless, limp, distressed, and gloomy. Suddenly moved by a compassionate maternal impulse, she put her hand under his chin and raised his head. Under the thin skin she could feel the muscles quivering and here and there the small slippery ball of a gland. She murmured:

'We must go to the doctor, Jeanpi. You're too thin.'

'No, no, mother, I'm not ill. Only . . .'

'Only what? What is it you want, my pet?'

'Nothing, nothing, mother. Oh, I don't know.'

Then, abruptly, resuming the *tutoiement* of his childhood, he exclaimed:

'Stay with us, mother.'

'For dinner? Impossible.'

'No, not for dinner.'

'Then what do you mean? I don't understand.'

'Stay with me, as you used to, as you always used to.'

He tried hard to smile, but failed. She kissed him and, not without betraying some impatience, succeeded in getting him out of the room. While he was going down the corridor she called after him:

'Where's your father? Do you know if he's come in?'

'No,' replied the boy. 'The train must be late. *Au revoir*, mother. I'm going to bed.'

Hélène hardly listened. Standing before the looking-glass, she hurriedly pulled off her clothes without ringing for her maid. A quarter of an hour later she left the house. With a brisk step she walked as far as the rue de Châteaudun, hailed a taxi, gave an address in an undertone, and was engulfed in an eddy of the Parisian whirlpool.

IX

JOSEPH did not get back until seven o'clock. He was received by the faithful Blaise Delmuter. Jeanpi had gone off to bed. Delphine was at Montredon for a three days' rest. She often went off like this, alone, to live rather queerly in a solitude about which she kept complete silence. Lucien was at his club. Joseph merely inquired:

'Where is madame?'

The young man in the beautiful morning coat replied.

'Monsieur le Président is already aware that on Wednesday madame always dines out.'

Joseph looked annoyed. He had just arrived from London, where he went once a month. He had an office in the City

for business matters that needed his personal attention. Also, he had spent four days at the Sucklings', the steel magnates. He said, as he crossed the hall:

'There's a marble tile which moves under my foot. Always the same one! It gets on my nerves. You'll telephone to Chevrel to come and fix it down once more. When there's something amiss in a house and it's left unattended to, the whole house goes to the devil. Order! Perfection! Nothing else matters: per-fec-tion! I'm going to have a snack. You will stay with me and we'll work. After that you'll have your evening free. But I still need you now for an hour.'

Joseph's dinner was quite ready and he had only to sit down. He sat down. They served him a hot *consommé* into which he poured straight off a large bowlful of red wine.

'That was a habit of my father's,' he explained. 'A *champoreau*, he called it. I believe it's looked upon as vulgar. I wonder why. The people who talk that sort of rot drink cocktails in which they mix everything: gin, tomato juice, vitriol, paregoric elixir, and fifty other foul things. Sit down, young Blaise. Just wait. I'll help myself to a morsel of salmon and a scrap of butter and then I'm ready for you.'

Joseph frequently said: 'As for me, I never need anything. I could live on five francs a day if I had to. Only in my position a man has to keep a good table, maintain a certain style of living, and, in short, keep up appearances. Apart from that, I'm never hungry, never thirsty. I'm never aware of my body.' That was how Joseph talked, and yet when he had a knife and fork in hand and attacked his food he looked as if he were leading a boarding-party. He now put several slices of smoked salmon on some good-sized pieces of bread and butter, got his jaws working, and said for the second time:

'Now, young Blaise, I'm ready for you.'

'Monsieur le Président,' began the young man in his smooth cold voice, 'the news is good. I went with M. Trintignan to the Ministry and I had the honour of being present during the interview which M. Trintignan had with M. Fourdillat. The minister was cordial, even effusive. It was agreed that

you would buy the three hundred tons of lentils at present stocked by the Cantal co-operatives. In exchange for this the minister promises you, first of all, an importation licence for three hundred tons of lentils from Chile. M. Trintignan undertakes, unless you already have other plans for these goods, to resell the Cantal lentils to one of his friends who is a grain broker living in Antwerp and can dispose of them in Spain.'

'Wait, wait,' said Joseph, as he swallowed in one magnificent gulp a final slice of salmon. 'We'll go slow about that Antwerp fellow. The decision isn't urgent. Lentils keep, you know.'

'Also, if you yourself don't wish to use the importation licence for the three hundred tons of good lentils, M. Trintignan agrees to take it up again for a firm he knows who would pay a sixty per cent premium to get hold of the sale of the Chile lentils. . . .'

'We'll see about that,' said Joseph, drawing towards him a dish on which were set out the legs and wings of a cold turkey and the large white slices that are cut from that bird's breast. 'We'll see about that. Give up forty per cent like that without looking into it! That's not my way. Trintignan is trying to be too clever and he doesn't open his mouth wide enough. But to come to the main thing. What about my cryos?'

'They come next. Secondly, then, the minister granted, then and there, an importation licence for three hundred tons without any stipulation as to the size of the machines. The rest has to be thrashed out with the committee of importers of refrigerators.'

'Oh, that! I can settle that all right. And the paper? Where's the paper? You've got the paper?'

'The paper, monsieur le Président, is in the hands of M. Trintignan.'

Joseph burst out laughing.

'Lucien is marvellous, the little wretch; he's got his thirty thousand francs.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'Nothing. Just something that occurred to me. And that old duffer of a du Thillot who kept on bleating: "Fourdillat is incorruptible!" The fool! He ought to have remembered the Cantal lentils. Well, so now it's all fixed up. I say, you over there, you, Arthur, bring me the jelly. Cold turkey is all very well, but it's rather dry. And that? What's that? Stuffed shoulder? It's all one to me, I'm not hungry. Give me some stuffed shoulder. Go on, young Blaise.'

'M. Obregon will sail from Havre next Monday on the Compagnie Transatlantique's *Niagara*. He left Paris yesterday, because he has business to transact at Havre, where he will be for two days. The reports from Mexico are quite splendid. They are already counting on getting a thousand barrels from the Delphine well alone. M. Obregon will see Señor Alonzo Zaldumbide and will get the lawsuit settled, regardless of cost. On leaving, M. Obregon seemed very pleased with the result obtained.'

'Good, good!' purred Joseph. 'You there, Arthur, give me some mustard and some gherkins. If I must have a cold meal, at least give me gherkins. Well, and then? Go on!'

'M. Lescaroux called again about the Island of Mairan. He says the whole of the island will have to be taken over: fifty hectares, with the small factory, which is still in good condition, and the seven houses of the workmen who understand the manufacture of the iodine and live on the spot with their families. Thirty-five people in all.'

'Yes. And when does he want an answer?'

'To-morrow.'

'I'll give him an answer to-morrow. Pass me the cheese and let me have some more butter. Arthur, you know I like Livarot cheese. See that I always have it. Seems to me I work hard enough to be allowed some small treats. Get hold of some Livarot. And now, young Blaise, what comes next?'

'Monsieur le Président will perhaps be glad to hear that the election will certainly take place before the holidays. M. le

Marquis de Janville telephoned on Saturday evening after leaving the Academy.'

'Oh, you might have told me that at once,' grumbled Joseph, slapping his broad palm on the table. 'That's really good news. Has the article appeared?'

Blaise Delmuter lowered his eyes and said in almost inaudible tones:

'The article has appeared in the *Crr*. Simionescault's friends look upon it as a hard knock and don't think he'll get over it. . . Monsieur le Président has not forgotten that he is expecting to dinner to-morrow evening M. Pujol and M. Teys-sèdre, members of the Institut, as well as several other people.'

'Yes. . . Just a moment. This coffee's cold, Arthur. There's no reason because I'm always more or less neglected in my house, there's no reason because I dine on a mere snack, there's no reason why I should be given over-ripe peaches and cold coffee. I hope you understand me, Arthur. What was that you were saying, young Blaise? the dinner to-morrow evening? How many shall we be altogether?'

'Thirteen, monsieur le Président. It's very unfortunate, but it's exactly thirteen.'

'My dear fellow, you'll put on a dinner-jacket and join us.'

'Monsieur le Président, I was going to dine with my sister.'

'Can't be helped, my dear fellow, can't be helped. If somebody cancels his engagement you can go and dine with your sister. If not, you'll dine here. Arthur, tell them downstairs to send up three wines, and champagne to finish up with Good wines, but nothing out of the ordinary. Not my Clos de Tart, nor the Romanée Saint-Vivant. None of these fellows who are coming to dine with me know a thing about wine. So don't let's waste it. And now, Blaise, have you finished?'

'I should also like to tell monsieur le Président that M. Sana soff has called twice since Saturday.'

'You must damn well show him the door. Now I'm going off. You're free, my dear fellow.'

'Oh, monsieur le Président, I'm staying in to-night. I've got some work to do. I've got to correct the article for

the *Moniteur*. If it should be absolutely necessary to reach monsieur le Président, where could I ring him?’

Joseph took Blaise by the arm, marched him out of the dining-room, and said, lowering his voice:

‘If you’ve anything really urgent to say to me, then . . . Trinité 53-79. But only if it’s something really serious.’

Blaise gave a slight nod and disappeared down the stairs.

Ten minutes later Joseph left his house, a cane in his right hand and a raincoat on his arm, for the weather was showery. He sauntered along peacefully, smoking a cigar, like someone taking an evening constitutional. It was the early part of a summer evening. Joseph walked without hurrying, pausing as though casually at shop windows and glancing behind him every moment. He seemed at the same time troubled and freed. He made his way by the side streets up the slope of the hill. From time to time he took a deep breath, stamped his feet in their thick crêpe soles on the asphalt pavement, and allowed his thoughts to wander, agreeably incoherent and fleeting, thoughts which he did not even trouble to control. ‘Those English,’ he thought to himself, ‘what fellows! Yes, we others imagine that we’ve got the most beautiful furniture, the most beautiful fabrics, the most beautiful jewels! Pff! we are mere children. The Sucklings did indeed astonish me. Their way of entertaining! And their house on the South Downs! Everything was perfect. Everything was better than at my place, richer and handsomer than at my place, more comfortable than at my place, even to the sheets in their damn beds. Now, that’s real luxury! Oh, we’re nothing but beginners. . . .’ Then, a little farther on, between his teeth: ‘Suckling *père*! He doesn’t even seem to make any difference between what is his and what isn’t. That’s perhaps the smartest thing of all. Perhaps it’s the most difficult.’

At that moment Joseph caught sight of his reflection in the mirror of a baker’s shop under the light of a street lamp, and his day-dream took another turn. ‘I say, I look like a seal. I look like a sea-elephant. Am I really getting too fat? It’s

disgusting! If I drop my head I show a double chin, and if I hold it up a roll of fat appears at the back of my neck. No getting out of it either way.'

So ruminated Joseph as he turned into the little rue Ballu, which is certainly one of the discreetest thoroughfares in this part of Paris. To reach it he had made several détours, not without making sure at each turning that he was not being followed. Suddenly he began to laugh. He had just remembered a remark of his brother Laurent's at the time of their great squabble outside the cemetery at Nesles. Father, Laurent had said, always installed his mistresses a couple of minutes from his house, so as not to have to make long journeys . . . So Joseph began to laugh all to himself 'It's funny,' he thought, 'it's really funny! Here am I doing like father. Oh, no, it isn't a matter of fatigue. I'm as vigorous as ever. It's only because I'm so rushed. I don't want to take my car because that would be too noticeable. So I walk. And as I never have a moment to spare . . .'

He laughed again in little bursts, coughed to clear his throat, and after having given a last look round, made his way into a house where the concierge gave him a slight nod as he passed.

There was a lift, but Joseph didn't take the lift. He still felt the need of a moment or two of meditative solitude. Now it was the demon of money that had flared up in him. 'Three hundred tons of cryogen straight away,' he thought, 'and that's only the beginning. Fourdillat the incorruptible will have a hundred and fifty more votes at the next elections. Oh, it's splendid! Two tons of emergency quota for one vote of a peasant-grower of lentils. And from now on, the Auvergnats will all be growing these unsalable lentils. Fourdillat is an old nunny! And in any case he will no longer be a minister by the time I need another helping hand. For his successor we shall have to think of some other dodge. We'll find it. And there's the Michoacan, which is going to turn out a first-class deal. That means a great lump of money next year, and in five or ten years' time a regular mountain of money, a Himalaya of money, so that one won't know

where to put it or what to do with it. Ah! but I shall always know. There's the Island of Mairan, I'll buy it, with its iodine works, its seven houses and its thirty-five Bretons, their kids, and their cats and dogs. Before another ten or twelve months, there'll be a hundred and fifty of them at work on the island concocting their filthy stuff.'

Joseph's thoughts outstripped his legs, for at this stage of his meditation he had only reached the first floor landing. He started on the flight to the next storey, and quite naturally as he went higher his meditations assumed greater spaciousness and dignity. 'The election will take place in ten days or so. The marquis has practically staked his honour; he won't fail me, and, if he doesn't fail me, then I shall have a majority. What would father think if from the other world he could see how his son is rising by dint of good principles and steady hard work? A very sizable fortune . . . ahem! mum's the word! . . . and the highest honours. M. Joseph Pasquier, member of the Institut. One doesn't put on one's visiting-cards Joseph Pasquier, owner of eleven properties in Paris, four hundred hectares in Calvados, seven factories, oil wells, etc. etc . . . But it's all right to put "Membre de l'Institut." . . . After that, well, after that, we shall have to find something else. The Legion of Honour's too ordinary. Chairmanships? I'm already up to the chin in them. We must find something else. The world isn't so small. . . '

Joseph broke off once more, for he had reached the second floor. The climb to the third floor was entirely given up to a glorious though somewhat confused day-dream. The ideas and words of success, victory, triumph, resounded in his ears like a burst of trumpets, trumpets of silver and gold. It was in the midst of this fanfare that the conqueror reached the third floor. Then the trumpets were suddenly silent. After having wiped his feet on a comfortable mat Joseph proceeded to knock at the door: three quick sharp knocks, followed after a pause by a single one; no more, no less. A well-rehearsed signal.

The door was opened promptly, and Joseph passed at once

with tranquil ease into a mysterious muffled universe laid with carpets with a pile as thick as fleeces, carpets as densely felted as grassy lawns, such carpets as make any room seem as if the ceiling were too low. Joseph entered with a familiar and yet respectful tread into a world lit only by shaded and many-tinted lamps. On the threshold he murmured: 'Where is madame?' And a voice replied: 'Madame is waiting for monsieur in the studio.'

Two hours later, Joseph, wrapped in a jade-green kimono, was eating his supper and giving an account of his journey and stay at the Sucklings'. Miotte had sent for caviare, asparagus, and champagne. Joseph ate lustily with the appetite of a man who, since morning, had visited two immense cities, travelled through two countries, crossed the sea, seen thousands of new faces, dealt with difficult and complicated matters, signed contracts, ordered the drilling of oil wells, suborned politicians, bought an island with its population complete, and sold cargoes of merchandise without having so much as seen them. He ate with the magnificent relish of a nobleman who can expect from life its richest and sweetest favours. Miotte ate with rather more restraint but just as heartily. She was a handsome woman, rather tall and plump, with fair, well-groomed hair. Her age was little more than thirty, but the look in her eyes was searching, experienced, almost severe; the look of an impeccably efficient housewife. The furniture, decoration, and works of art in the studio offered a charming and delicate gradation of greens, from jade through emerald green, the green of light, sea-green, and bottle-green, to the green of the Bosphorus. In her pleasant and well-modulated voice—she was studying singing and was not without hope of appearing at important concerts—Miotte occasionally said to Joseph: 'When you are a member of the Institut, you'll come and see me one day in your uniform, and it will be I and I alone who will have chosen the shade of its embroidery.' When she sang the huntsman's song from Schubert's *Maid of the Mill*, she used to declare emphatically: 'Green is my colour.'

Joseph was admirably indulgent of Miotte's principles and opinions. As he sucked away at the asparagus, delicately green like everything around him, he said: 'It's only here with you, Miotte, that I am really cared for. It's only here that I get what I really like.' Miotte nodded gently without replying. Then Joseph quaffed his wine, gazed into the green depths of the room, towards some faraway spot in this green and magic world, and said again: 'When I got home from my journey they gave me the most awful dinner. I work like a galley-slave and they never show me the slightest attention.'

Miotte allowed the oblique reference to 'them' to come and go without greeting it with the flutter of an eyelid. Then Joseph bent his head till it rested on her shoulder and murmured dolefully: 'If I'm to show myself at my best, I must have someone to love me.'

Miotte did not have to make any response to this confidence, for at that moment the telephone bell rang out. Strangely enough, it seemed to Joseph that the sound of it was green, a cruel and poisonous chemical green. Miotte eagerly snatched at the instrument. After listening in silence, she said to Joseph: 'I rather think it's for you. But it's hard to make out, as if the current were failing.'

Joseph took the receiver. There issued from it a high-pitched monotonous whistling sound — what Cécile, the musician, used to call the eternity theme. But Joseph had a secret horror of the eternity theme. He began to bawl so loudly that he aroused the phantoms of the night. A voice at last emerged from the silence. Joseph began to stammer: 'It's idiotic! You're positive? What does all that mean? Repeat the text of the message . . . Yes, yes. . . . Repeat again the part between the two last "stops." . . . It's absolutely crazy. It's . . . it's atrocious . . . Yes, of course, I'm going there at once. . . .'

He detached himself heavily from the receiver and had to make several fumbling attempts before he was able to replace it correctly. 'I've got to go back,' he groaned.

He looked so upset, so worried and anxious, that Miotte immediately inquired:

'What have you just been told?'

'Pooh! Nothing to worry about,' replied the lord of the Michoacan, as he threw off his green kimono. 'A troublesome business matter. Mexican oil. . . . A cable transmitted to me after a delay of two hours! I must go back at once and look into it and think it over, and if necessary take some steps. . . . Yes, some steps, because I've had enough of this. . . . I'm not superstitious . . . but . . .'

As he got into his clothes he repeated three or four times: 'I'm not superstitious. . . . No, no, I'm not superstitious. . . . No, no, as for that, I'm not superstitious, but . . .'

X

M. RAVIER-GAUFRE was expected at nine o'clock in the morning. Joseph's night had been far from restful. He began to stir about dawn, went into the bathroom, ran the water, took a shower, heaved great sighs as he disported himself under the douche, now scalding, now icy, and then by way of a salutary counter-irritant, devoted a quarter of an hour and more to Swedish exercises. As the weather was warm and the president was now in a sweat, he gave himself another shower, took note that it was not more than half-past seven, and began to shave to an accompaniment of grumbles and curses.

Joseph's bedroom and H  l  ne's were separated by the bathroom. The sound of running water is a most irritating sound. It drowns and distorts all other sounds. It penetrates among our thoughts like some restless parasite. H  l  ne got up, ran a big tortoiseshell comb through her thick hair, slipped on a wrapper and a cap, and came and joined Joseph.

Almost at once a squabble started, the subject of which was nothing new. For the last year H  l  ne had been wanting to have an isolated pavilion built on the edge of the plateau at

Montredon in the style of the Little Trianon. Up to now, Joseph had objected on embarking on what he called 'a frenzied expenditure.' He said: 'The love for small rooms in those days was understandable, my dear, on account of heating difficulties which have no meaning to-day with our present conveniences. And then, believe me, this taste for Trianons savours of the end of a regime. And we are just making a beginning.'

The dispute was resumed that morning, but Joseph seemed to be in a state of panic and would not waste a minute on argument. 'I'm on the brink of ruin,' he grumbled, 'and you talk about building! A folly which will cost me at least three hundred thousand francs. My dear, you're crazy.'

Hélène did not appear to be alarmed by this pessimistic outlook: every time Joseph lost five francs he declared that the end of the world was coming. But she felt that it was an inopportune moment to risk an offensive, so she beat a prudent retreat, leaving Joseph to grapple with his demons.

At five minutes to nine Blaise Delmutter came on duty. He looked half awake. Joseph had kept him up until one o'clock while he commented endlessly on recent happenings, on the cable received that evening, on Señor Hernando Obregon whose absence was disturbing, on the information one could hope to get out of M. Ravier-Gaufre and the reasons why the latter had waited so long before transmitting the text of a cable of such importance.

M. Ravier-Gaufre was the French associate and partner of Señor Obregon. He was also Joseph's adviser on all matters concerning oil. He arrived punctually at nine o'clock, as he had promised. Joseph took him into his study and immediately flung himself on him like a pike on a gudgeon.

The gudgeon was of some weight. M. Ravier-Gaufre was a fat little man on whose lips there hovered a perpetual smile. He was immediately absorbed by an arm-chair, while Joseph paced about the room with long strides, plying him with innumerable questions. M. Ravier-Gaufre knew his man and refused to allow himself to be upset. One must, until

something fresh turned up, rely on the exact wording of the cable. There was no room for uncertainties: well number six had caught fire. An inquiry was on foot. The fire seemed to be due to sabotage. Mexican justice would take its course. On this part of the concession the wells were a considerable distance from one another and there was no reason, pending further information, to worry about the stores or the plant. The engineers were investigating the means of making good the damage . . . etc.

'Ta-ta-ta!' Joseph rapped out through his teeth. 'Making good! I was in Bucharest three years ago. There was a well on fire to the left of the railway line. You could see it at night, a huge blaze of flames and smoke. I was in Bucharest again this year, in February, and the well was still burning.'

M Ravier-Gaufre raised two delicate priestly hands in a gesture of regret and impotence. But President Pasquier had already resumed his striding and scolding. Number six, that was the Delphine well, the only one which yielded oil under pressure, the only one whose output, up to date, could be considered sufficient to encourage confidence in the rest of the business. And now it had gone and caught fire before having paid back even a quarter of the overhead expenses. To say it had caught fire was a mere juggling with words. It had been set fire to. And by whom, he'd damn well like to know?

As the fat little man once more raised his arms with a smile that endeavoured to look woebegone, Joseph let himself drop into a chair and wiped his brow.

'Ill will! Ill will!' he repeated. 'I ask you why? What can any one in Mexico have against me? The people there don't know me, and I don't know them either. I've never set foot in the place. You have done the trip, Ravier-Gaufre, can you make it out? What sort of people are they, my dear man?'

'They are revolutionaries.'

'Revolutionaries as much as you like. But why have their revolution on my property? It's none of their business. My

business is a very decent honest business. I too, in my own way and methods, am a sort of revolutionary. But I don't interfere in other people's affairs. I certainly don't concern myself with what they are doing and thinking out there in Mexico.'

M. Ravier-Gaufre contemplated Joseph Pasquier with the wondering eyes of a man who encounters a remarkable specimen of exceptional candour and sublime naïveté. But without waiting further, Joseph burst out into angry recriminations

'The whole business is doomed; one which has already cost me a fortune and out of which I shall get nothing but disappointment. And this business, Ravier-Gaufre, I went into entirely on your reports. I'll show them to you, old man; they were entirely favourable, not to say enthusiastic.'

'Monsieur le Président,' replied the fat man, 'I know my reports by heart and I'm prepared to sign them all over again. I promised you oil; very well, you have oil. Sir Oliver Ellis, M. Obregon, and myself have thoroughly investigated the whole business and our position is unassailable. We have given you first-class information on the value of the oil field. Our prospectors are first-rate experts. We did not advise you on the moral condition of the population. There are people there from all parts of the world. Obregon knows the country much better than I do, but he can't possibly control the enlistment of labour or guarantee its loyalty.'

'Obregon! Obregon! Where is he? Gadding about all over the place! And here we are, left like blind men in a cellar. I'm going to get Obregon on the phone.'

'It's risky and even useless. Obregon sails to-morrow, and he has business to get through at Havre. Besides, he doesn't know any more than I do.'

'He can come here, and catch the first train back.'

'He won't be able to add anything to what I have already told you. I have cabled to Quevedo; unfortunately Quevedo is without a doubt in Texas, at Houston.'

'What the hell is he doing at Houston, instead of being at his office?'

'Monsieur le Président, allow me to say that you are being unreasonable. Just another word on the value of the business. Sir Oliver Ellis, whose competence and loyalty are above suspicion, has set aside for his personal remuneration a tenth of the profits, which clearly indicates that he is convinced that there will be profits. If the business were without a future, Sir Oliver Ellis wouldn't have recommended it to begin with, nor would he have retained any interests in it. As to M. Lopez de Quevedo, he is a man of birth and breeding, extremely well-informed and, as a director, full of initiative. He has been notified of the new kinds of pumping machinery in use in Texas. He has gone off to examine the new pumps in action before ordering any. Now what would you have done in his place? You see, monsieur le Président, if you are to weather attacks of "oil fever," you must have a steady head and nerves equal to all emergencies.'

'One moment, one moment, my dear man. As for nerves and head, I don't need advice from any one, thank you. Take that as said.'

'I know, monsieur le Président. But you are sometimes very hard to approach, if you will allow me to say so. About six months ago we learnt that there was in Mexico a strong nationalist movement, hostile to all foreigners.'

'But surely not towards the French?'

'Towards the French as much as towards the others. Why should the French enjoy any special privileges? Do you suppose that they have forgiven us over there for that affair of Maximilian?'

'Maximilian? What Maximilian?'

'The Emperor Maximilian.'

'Oh, yes, the emperor. . . . But that's ancient history. Well, and then?'

'Then M. Obregon mentioned to you, some six months ago, the information he had received of the state of unrest among the working-class population. You refused to listen to him.'

'I am going to send for Obregon.'

'No, no. It's quite useless, monsieur le Président, and M. Obregon would be greatly incensed at being sent for unnecessarily just before sailing.'

'Unnecessarily! You are the limit! Here is a business which for two years has been sucking the very marrow out of my bones. And this business is going to collapse in my hands just at the moment when it was beginning to take a turn for the better. It's enough to drive one mad. A hundred thousand dollars thrown away, without counting the time, the overhead expenses of all kinds, and the preliminary work. Two years that I have been pouring out good money after bad, as I pointed out to Obregon last month. I'm going to telegraph to Obregon not to sail.'

'That would be the signal for Obregon to sail without a moment's delay.'

'Well then, what the hell do you want me to do?'

'Just wait, monsieur le Président, wait calmly.'

'Yes, wait, fretting myself to bits and chucking ten thousand dollars every week or so into that fire at well number six.'

'Just a little patience, monsieur le Président.'

'As to patience, I don't need any advice. I know all about it. I'm not superstitious, but . . .'

'But what, monsieur le Président?'

'No, nothing, nothing, old man. Just thinking of something.'

Joseph rose to his feet once more and made several turns round the room without a word. M. Ravier-Gaufre waited, enshrined in his leather chair. Blaise, behind the desk, seemed to be asleep, though his eyes were wide open. Joseph finally halted, unclenched his fists, opened his mouth, and declared in level tones:

'Old man, I'm not going to wait'

Not without deference M. Ravier-Gaufre let it be understood that he desired some further enlightenment. It was not at once forthcoming. Joseph was trying to control his twitch, his left cheek furrowed right up to the temple. After a long interval he began to speak in a dreamy voice, as though he were talking to himself:

'One day during the war I accompanied the intendant général on a visit to an operating-station. The surgeons examined the wounds and carved right into the flesh in order to cut out everything that was unsound. It was terrible and drastic. I came away saying to myself: "There, that's exactly my own method in business. I discovered it for myself. And I shall always stick to it." So I'm going to get rid of this Michoacan business, cut it out, even at a loss.'

'I don't think that at such a moment, monsieur le Président, one could sell without loss. Very well then, why sell? Wait just a month, wait, let us say, for the return of M. Obregon'

'What! Another month! Another twenty thousand dollars! More grey hairs! No, I'm going to make a cut. I prefer to make a cut. I too, in my own way, am a surgeon.'

'Well, wait just a fortnight.'

'No. I won't even wait a fortnight if I can help it. I've already waited far too long.'

'Please take notice, monsieur le Président, and you too, Monsieur Delmuter, that I have done my utmost to make you exercise patience, monsieur le Président, to prevail on you to wait a little longer.'

'I take notice, if that gives you any satisfaction, but it doesn't change my opinion. The next thing is to find a fellow who'll be willing to buy.'

'As the business is still in my opinion a first-class investment, it isn't impossible to find a purchaser.'

'Do you know any one?'

'One always knows someone. I certainly know someone'

'What's his name?'

'It wouldn't mean anything to you.'

'How do you know? Who is it?'

'A certain Thomas Young.'

'Young? Not an Englishman, I trust?'

'He was born in the rue Vieille-du-Temple.'

'That needn't mean anything. No, I won't sell to an Englishman; I've had too much to do with them throughout this whole business'

'He's not an Englishman, I give you my word.'

There was a moment's silence. M. Ravier-Gaufre drummed with his ten fingers on the resonant leather of his arm-chair. Joseph raised his head and looked about him with a surly glance of inquiry. His eyes met for a second Blaise Delmuter's impassive face, and he had the feeling that the young man gave him an almost imperceptible flicker of the eyelid in sign of approbation.

'That fellow of yours with the English name,' Joseph went on a moment later, 'if I sell out to him he's going to try to do me. That's not so easy. He needn't think it's easy.'

'Monsieur le Président,' Ravier-Gaufre replied with emphasis, 'every one in Paris and elsewhere knows that if M. Joseph Pasquier is willing to sell a business it means that in his eyes it isn't worth much.'

'Not worth much? It's still first-class. You've just said so yourself. I take you at your word and I believe you.'

'Well, then, if you believe me, monsieur le Président, don't sell.'

Joseph shrugged his shoulders and bit his lips.

'I'm not selling because I think the business isn't worth anything. I'm selling . . .'

'Because,' put in the fat man softly, 'because you can't spare the time to think about an uncertain business, which to you, quite wrongly, seems too risky.'

'Yes! No! I'm selling because I choose to sell.'

'That's not an argument likely to carry much weight with a purchaser. Well, monsieur le Président, you must prepare yourself to undergo a very painful operation, since you choose to use surgical language.'

Joseph stamped his foot angrily two or three times.

'Bring your fellow along. And if by any chance he's a fool, so much the better. Can you bring him to-morrow morning? And if he's a sensible man we'll settle just the same.'

'Yes, I think I can. I'll see. I'll try to get in contact with Young. And then I'll call you up. You're in a great hurry, my dear president.'

'When surgeons have decided to operate they don't hang around for a month before taking up the knife. Telephone me to-night Good-bye, Monsieur Ravier-Gaufre.'

The fat man did not take his leave without a few compliments on Joseph's way of understanding and dealing with business matters. Directly he was out of the room Joseph whirled round on the young man in the morning coat.

'You weren't asleep, I hope. You looked torpid.'

'I certainly wasn't asleep, monsieur le Président.'

'You tipped me a wink just now. Do you know something? Obregon possibly dropped you a hint, on the sly, before leaving?'

'No, monsieur le Président.'

'Oh? I thought he did. I'm going to sell out. I've got my own reasons. After that I shall be at peace and I shall be able to devote myself to the things I really care about. You went yesterday, didn't you, to the auction rooms? I forgot to ask.'

'Yes, monsieur le Président.'

'There were no fewer than eighteen Gretchenkos. The entire collection of that fool of a Boller. How perfectly idiotic to put eighteen pictures on the market at one go! And what did they fetch?'

'Oh, rather poor prices. There were no collectors. Paufigue bought in the eight best ones at decent enough prices. He told me it was a great sacrifice, and that he couldn't at the moment go any higher. He very much regretted that you weren't there.'

'Yes, he counted on me, no doubt to save the rest of the cargo. A dealer who drops one of his protégés in a crisis is a traitor and, what is much more serious, a bungler. Well, and then, what about the last ten pictures? What did they fetch?'

'Next to nothing, monsieur le Président. A thousand or two thousand francs at the most.'

'But look here, that's perfectly frightful! I've got at least two hundred thousand francs' worth at the normal rate.

Frightful! If it goes on like that I shall follow suit and sell my own collection of Gretchenkos. As to this Michoacan affair, I'm not superstitious, but . . . Ah, well, we'll go into that some other time. What do you want to say to me?'

'I've put on monsieur le Président's desk two numbers of *Aristophane*. It's a filthy little blackmailing rag. Monsieur le Président need not worry about it particularly. Everybody reads those papers and everybody despises them.'

'Yes, but everybody reads them for all that. And what does it say, this *Aristophane*?'

'It's about the election of monsieur le Président. They say . . .'

'What? What?'

'That it'll make all Paris laugh.'

'That all? Well, tear up the stuff and chuck it into the waste-paper basket. I'll call you presently. I want to be alone. I've got to think.'

When alone, Joseph pulled off his coat and waistcoat. He did not wear braces, but a plain leather belt, like the American business men one sees in the Pullmans in their shirt-sleeves in the summer. He breathed deeply through his nose, and began to walk very quickly up and down. It had been hot and thundery ever since morning, and Joseph began to sweat profusely.

He was going to lose a big sum of money over the Michoacan. Right! When this sum was lost he was still the master of a considerable fortune, a fortune which with all its tangles and ramifications could no longer be reckoned with precision, made up as it was of a multitude of dissimilar parts, a conglomeration of real and personal estate, securities, bullion, houses, châteaux, lands, and factories. And what else besides was there in this fortune? Pictures, jewels, gold, precious stones, cattle, ships, mines. . . . Well, then, the Michoacan—perhaps a million francs in all—what could that matter, after all? One must make a clean cut, turn one's back, and get on with the job again.

That was how Joseph tried to reassure himself. And he

did not succeed. Never before had he completely failed in an enterprise. Always at the last hour he had been suddenly inspired to invent some stratagem and re-establish his equilibrium. The idea of accepting a set-back, even accepting it deliberately, was to him intolerable. Yet the idea of temporizing, of pouring still more dollars into that sieve, and finding himself each day more involved through his previous sacrifices, this idea filled him with positive anguish.

He recalled his visits to the vegetable garden at Montredon. The gardener would say to him: 'Monsieur, when a pumpkin stops growing, even if only for a single minute, it's done for, it's ready to rot, and one can spot it at once.' And Joseph said to himself: 'A fortune is exactly like a pumpkin. If it stops growing for a single minute, it's a sign that it's sick and that it'll soon be dead.'

He repeated, between his teeth 'I'm not superstitious, but . . .'

Thereupon he pulled out of his pocket a fat leather purse. He only half opened it, as peasants do, and carefully with his strong hairy fingers took out a gold louis, a fine twenty-franc piece. He murmured: 'Heads, I sell at no matter what price. Tails, I hold on.' The coin spun in the air and fell on the carpet. Joseph heaved a painful sigh of relief. 'I sell! That's settled. Now Ravier-Gaufre must find a buyer. Ravier-Gaufre was trying to prevent me from selling! Ravier-Gaufre is a swine. Obregon is a swine. Whichever way I look, nothing but swine. A world of swine. I know what I'm talking about.'

XI

EVEN when one has the loins of an athlete, the fists of a lumberman, the neck of a boxer, even when one can claim to have a strong head, a sound heart, nerves equal to any strain, even when one has had a long experience of the malice and perfidy of mankind, it is always unpleasant to receive anonymous letters.

During the course of his stormy career, Joseph had already received many anonymous letters. One could hardly have promoted complicated business deals, taken part in the political life of a great country, sought after honours, have been, in fact, a representative citizen and a party leader, without arousing some ill feeling among the multitude of imbecile worms who crawl and wriggle in the dark, and without occasionally being the recipient of a drop of their venom. These dastardly letters were full of abuse and sometimes of ugly threats. More often than not they betrayed symptoms of insanity: it is well known that people who indulge in that sort of thing are either degenerates or madmen. Joseph had a special flair for recognizing these disgraceful missives by their envelopes alone. He would read them all the same, for their documentary value, as he put it. Then he would give way to short bouts of temper, after which he would chuck the lot into the waste-paper basket. Now and again he would be caught on the raw. It would then take him two or three days to get over his mortification, two or three days during which this cunning old fighter set about trying to trace the source of the attack in view of possible reprisals.

Now this letter which had just been handed to him on a salver while he was still in bed, this letter without a stamp, but carefully addressed, had no appearance of being anonymous, and Joseph had opened it unsuspectingly.

For all that it was an anonymous letter, and one of a most disturbing kind. Having glanced through it once with eyes still heavy with morning sleep Joseph hastened to read it again, and then rang for his valet.

'Where did this letter come from?' he inquired. 'It's not stamped and the post doesn't come before nine. Who brought it here?'

'I don't know, monsieur. I'll go and ask the concierge.'

While the valet was off to inquire, Joseph read the letter again. He thrust forward his lips in two thick rolls, which with him was a sign of great disturbance. Finally the valet returned and said:

'It was a messenger boy from a restaurant, no doubt.'

'Was there any name on his cap?'

'There was nothing on his cap.'

'Right. Thank you.'

Joseph went into the bathroom to shave. This operation disposed of, he came back to read the letter once more and to dress. In such circumstances, if the letter was particularly remarkable for its oddity, Joseph would occasionally show it to his wife so as to have an audience for his laughter or rage. He did nothing of the kind this morning. No, he was not going to tear this letter up. But, first of all, was he going to go . . . ? Wouldn't it be wiser, after all, to throw it in the fire, like the others, like all the others of its kind?

When he went into his office, Joseph could not refrain from pulling the letter out of his pocket in order to give it another reading. Nothing there, obviously, of the usual blotches and smudges and even drawings with which the specialists in this line are fond of decorating their efforts. On the elegant white notepaper, ten lines of a fine script, extraordinarily neat and clear. Ten lines, no more.

'Someone who takes a special interest in M. Joseph Pasquier advises him to go, next Wednesday, about ten o'clock in the evening, to the corner of the rue Thoun and the rue Blainville, in the fifth arrondissement, and keep an eye on number 7 rue de l'Estrapade and carefully watch the people leaving that house. The matters at stake are of too serious a nature for M. Joseph Pasquier to allow any one whatsoever to take his place in the handling of this delicate situation.'

Nothing more. Nothing to throw even a glimmer of light on this absurd mystery. 'The matters at stake!' What matters? If it was something to do with the Michoacan, why all these melodramatic precautions? Besides, Joseph had already made up his mind about the Michoacan, and definitely settled on his line of action. He began to think: 'Wednesday! Still five full days, nearly six, before this strange rendezvous; and the Michoacan business would be concluded this very morning.'

Yes, this very morning. Yes, he was determined, unless some insurmountable obstacle presented itself, to rid himself of this robe of Nessus.

Obviously, therefore, the anonymous message could have no connection with the Michoacan. Besides, was he such a silly mug as to fall into what was probably a trap set for him by some daring practical jokers? Did they think they could make a laughing-stock of him? Let them try! He'd turn the joke on the jokers and tear up the letter.

He did not tear it up. Very carefully he put it in his pocket. Then he made a great effort to pull himself together in readiness for the strenuous day which had barely begun.

M. Ravier-Gaufre had telephoned the evening before to inform him that he would come in the early part of the morning bringing M. Thomas Young, and that M. Thomas Young would not be unwilling to purchase the Michoacan business, provided the seller was prepared in advance to make substantial sacrifices.

A little before ten o'clock M. Ravier-Gaufre appeared with a secretary carrying the documents. A few moments later, M. Thomas Young was seen to arrive, accompanied in his turn by a silent assistant, who turned out to be a stenotypist. The latter took his machine from its case, and from the very outset, began to register the whole of the proceedings, even to the briefest of replies, even, as it appeared later, to the interjections and onomatopoeic ejaculations, perhaps even the sighs. This did not fail to surprise and annoy Joseph, who began to look daggers at this too diligent witness. M. Young pointed out that he never went anywhere without his stenotypist, and, as M. Pasquer would have occasion to notice subsequently, it was not without advantage for all concerned. Hereupon M. Blaise Delmuter entered and took up his place behind his chief, and then the discussion was ready to begin.

M. Thomas Young in no way resembled M. Ravier-Gaufre. He was very thin and very pale, with scanty, lustreless hair. One could not look at him without feeling that he was about to draw his last breath, that he was tubercular or secretly a

prey to some cancerous growth. 'Life is crazy,' thought Joseph. 'Here is a man who looks like a shadow, a ghost, a skeleton. And this man comes along to buy a business which will probably not yield any appreciable profit for another five or six years, if ever. And the man who is selling, the man who wants to sell, that's me, and I'm in the prime of life. Fifty-one! Well, what? That's the middle of life . . . It remains to be seen if this perambulating corpse really does intend to buy this business of mine.'

The perambulating corpse was very enigmatic. He didn't say much. And as M. Ravier-Gaufre preserved a strict silence it was Joseph who necessarily made all the advances and did all the talking. He started off by explaining that for the last two years he had possessed a very excellent oil concern in central Mexico, that he was the owner of the concern, that Sir Oliver Ellis, through whom the concession had been acquired, had reserved for himself a commission of one-tenth on present and future profits, which enabled one to judge the value of the concern, bearing in mind Sir Oliver's competence in such matters; that in any case, he, Joseph Pasquier, was the sole master of the concern, and that, for personal reasons which would take too long to go into, he intended to dispose of the whole affair; that this decision had no connection with the accident that had occurred a few days previously to one of the wells of the concession, but had been taken many weeks ago, because he, Joseph Pasquier, was at present so overwhelmed with work that he could not keep a sufficiently strict control over the business and preferred to confine his attention to enterprises over which he could exercise a more direct supervision; that in M. Obregon and M. Ravier-Gaufre he had two excellent and devoted associates; that he had a great admiration for M. de Quevedo, the Mexican director of the concession, but that to maintain the business it would be necessary in future to make a trip to Mexico at least once a year, and that he, Joseph Pasquier, could not leave his other business concerns every year for five or six weeks or even longer.

M. Thomas Young punctuated each of Joseph's phrases with a slight jerk of his fleshless skull. The stenotypist went on tapping his machine, whose ribbon unwound itself with implacable regularity. M. Ravier-Gaufre and his assistant remained perfectly dumb. At last Joseph ceased and silence fell.

This silence had already lasted for half a minute when M. Thomas Young actually decided to speak. He certainly had no trace of an English accent. He spoke like a Frenchman from Lille or the Pas-de-Calais. In a few words he let it be understood that he already had a certain amount of information on the subject and that he intended to go into the matter very thoroughly. If M. Pasquier allowed him sufficient time to get in touch with his friends in Mexico, he hoped to be able to offer a decent price for the business; but if, as M. Ravier-Gaufre had led him to believe, M. Pasquier was in a hurry to sell and settle, then the deal was a much more risky one and might prove to be disappointing for the seller.

Joseph replied irritably that he was leaving for a journey and did not think he could start before having found a satisfactory settlement of the Michoacan business. He had always been prompt and open in his dealings; all the accounts relating to the Michoacan were in the hands of M. Ravier-Gaufre, and M. Young could consult them at his convenience.

Thousands and thousands of times Joseph had had encounters of this kind. Always he had come out of them the winner, and even when he had not obtained a complete victory he had at least saved his stake with his audacity and astuteness. Unfortunately on that particular morning everything seemed to conspire to unnerve him and upset his control of the argument. His position was none too good. He had let it be seen, indeed he allowed it to be seen much too clearly from every word he let fall, that he was eager to sell at any price and without delay. He himself did not understand the haste. He had never experienced it before. It set his fingers shaking and his voice trembling. At each sentence that fell from his lips M. Thomas Young turned to the solemn

stenotypist with a spectral wave of the hand, as if to say: 'Write, note it down, don't omit a thing. You heard what M. Joseph Pasquier has just said.' The stenotypist with his robot movements upset President Pasquier more and more. M. Thomas Young looked like an anatomical preparation, a fit figure for the *danse macabre*, and that in itself seemed to exercise a depressing influence on Joseph. 'I am certainly not going to yield to superstition. Never have I given way to superstition. After all, why sell? I'm going to surrender my business to this pirate for a mere song. I'm going to drop at least a million francs into the fellow's pocket. A million! It's appalling! Enough to make me ill. As a matter of fact I must be ill or I shouldn't be ready to do such a fool thing. Must be liver. Yes, it's liver. I must cut out mirabelle and kirsch. I'll cut out all kinds of things. Laurent says that at about fifty the liver always draws attention to itself. This kind of vague weariness, this bad taste in the mouth, this thick tongue, it can only be liver. But, after all, am I really going to sell? Yes, it's got to be, I'm going to sell. Ravier-Gaufre doesn't utter a word. Ravier-Gaufre lets me flounder without even attempting to come to my rescue. Ravier-Gaufre is a swine. He wants to prevent my selling; it's a clear sign: I shall sell on the spot and at any price.'

Joseph had reached this stage in his meditations when M. Thomas Young asked to look at the accounts. He buried himself in the papers and for a full quarter of an hour there was complete silence. Joseph rose to his feet and went over to the window. He appeared to be looking into the courtyard, but he was not looking into the courtyard. He was pondering: 'Surely there's something new going on in my body. I've never felt what I'm feeling to-day. I'll have to keep a watch on my blood-pressure. I'll have my urine analysed. I'll go and have my blood tested, yes, let them see if I haven't got hold of some filthy germ. It's come to this; here am I, growing as idiotic as my poor brother Ferdinand and his ridiculous wife. Must be a family failing. Well, then, no, I won't sell. I'll damn well clear out this gang of

sharpers with their blasted little stenographic machine which gets on my nerves.'

At that moment the footman entered, to be greeted at once with: 'Kindly keep out of here!' But the footman held out a telegram, and Joseph seized the telegram.

He withdrew into a window recess in order to read it. It was from Obregon. The wording was explicit and sufficiently detailed:

'Leaving Havre in two hours. Unfortunately cannot come to Paris or delay further my return to Mexico. Beg you to take no decision regarding the Michoacan before receiving fresh detailed information which I will send you on arrival at Chupicuaro.

Faithfully yours,

OBREGON.'

Joseph folded the paper and put it in his pocket without uttering a word. 'The plot has been carefully planned,' he thought to himself. 'Ravier-Gaufre, Obregon, and the others have put their heads together to keep me from selling. In a fortnight I shall get a reassuring telegram and at the same time a request to send twenty thousand dollars immediately. And I shall send them because I shall have been weak enough to wait a fortnight. After that I shall wait another two or three weeks. During that time their blasted revolutionaries will have set fire to the Lucien well and the Joseph well, the only two yielding anything since the Delphine well has gone phut. And then, to avoid losing everything, I shall have to shell out another considerable number of dollars, put in a claim for damages on account of the fire, start a law-suit on political lines in a country peopled with frantic agitators, a law-suit which in itself will cost me a fortune. Very well, I say no, no, no! Obregon and Ravier-Gaufre are in league to fleece me. When the bear has got his paw caught in the trap, he tears it off and escapes. I'm going to sacrifice my paw. Perhaps it may grow again.'

At that moment M. Thomas Young lifted his cadaverous visage from the papers and said deliberately:

'The business appears to be compromised by this matter of the fire, but it is still worth buying. I will make you an offer next week.'

Joseph whirled round. 'Why next week?' he said. 'You're acting in your own name, I take it.'

'I'm acting in my own name.'

'Do you intend to buy, or do you not intend to buy?'

'I have no intention either way. I have not made up my mind.'

'And what sum, roughly speaking, do you think of offering me next week?'

The thin man blinked his eyelids two or three times over his fish-like eyes and said deliberately:

'Twenty-five thousand dollars.'

Joseph gave a shout of laughter.

'You know that I have spent up to date at least a hundred thousand dollars. All the accounts are there in perfect order. I am M. Joseph Pasquier. Every one in Paris knows that if M. Joseph Pasquier sinks a hundred thousand dollars in a business, that business must certainly be worth it.'

'If that is so, stick to it. I'm not pressing you to part with it.'

Joseph twitched his head like a horse feeling the spur.

'I've already told you that I have personal reasons for wishing to sell, reasons which have no connection whatsoever with the business.'

'Reasons for selling a business can never be without some connection with the business.'

'That's just where you're mistaken. But wait, wait! Supposing I offered to deal at once, yes, to sign on the spot a promise to sell.'

'Then I should say that the business would only be worth fifteen thousand dollars.'

'It would be worth twenty-five thousand next week and wouldn't be worth more than fifteen thousand to-day? I don't understand.'

'Monsieur Pasquier, that is simply because you don't wish to understand. By this time next week I shall have looked into things, and I shall have endeavoured to fathom the reasons which have decided you to get rid of the business.'

'I tell you there's no reason that you are not aware of.'

'It's my business to discover those reasons and to examine them as closely as possible.'

The wrangle threatened to go on interminably. As a matter of fact it lasted for another two solid hours, during which M. Joseph Pasquier lost control of his ideas, of his words, and what was more, of his actions. He gesticulated wildly, thumping his chest and his thighs, mixed up the papers, and kept getting up and sitting down without reason. M. Ravier-Gaufre, ever silent, watched him in amazement, and even Joseph himself in his rare moments of lucidity was astonished at himself. 'Never have I behaved like this,' he thought. 'I must be on the verge of some serious illness. So much the worse! So much the worse! I shall go through with it to the bitter end, and after that I shall be at peace. Yes, after that I shall be at peace. I shall have paid a high price, but at least I shall be at peace.'

At a quarter to one, M. Joseph Pasquier and M. Thomas Young signed a deed of sale according to which M. Pasquier disposed of all his rights in the Michoacan concern in return for a lump sum of twenty thousand dollars, payable next week, on the signing of the agreements in the presence of the official notary.

M. Thomas Young rose as Lazarus must have risen from his tomb, pale and rigid: never had he raised his voice, or uttered an unnecessary word or lost a drop of sweat. Joseph appeared at once dizzy with relief and drunk with despair.

As he escorted the business men to the door he thrust his hands in his pockets and pulled out two papers which he stared at in some bewilderment. One was the telegram from Obregon; the other—that sheet of white notepaper folded in four—was the anonymous letter received the same morning, and which he had forgotten during this sordid wrangle.

The footman then came to announce that lunch was ready and that madame had begun, and that she wished to know if monsieur le Président would or would not be lunching at home.

Joseph went and joined Hélène at the table and immediately began to speak of the Michoacan. The three children were absent. As a matter of fact it was quite exceptional for the whole family to find themselves together, and no one any longer gave the matter a thought. As he left his office Joseph had resolved to dismiss the Michoacan from his thoughts, but no sooner was he seated with his plate in front of him than he began talking about it with the fury of a maniac. Hélène did not listen with much attention. For the last five-and-twenty years she had been hearing Joseph hold forth and she no longer gave such outbursts anything more than a polite pretence of interest. For her own part she did not appear to be in complete control of her thoughts and reactions. She laughed at the slightest thing. It was a nervous, artificial laugh which stirred her ample bosom. She kept on flushing suddenly without apparent reason.

'Have you got the vapours?' said Joseph.

Hélène shrugged her shoulders, offended. Vapours? Vapours? What an idea! She hadn't got the vapours. She was as strong as a tree.

Joseph replied roughly:

'Trees fall ill just like the rest of us, believe me.'

Hélène tossed her head and laughed again. No, no, there was nothing to fear; the Hélène tree was flourishing and full of life. In spite of himself Joseph began to talk once more about the Michoacan. It was stronger than all his good resolutions. The Michoacan was like a fish-bone stuck in his throat and refusing to be swallowed. All of a sudden Hélène said:

'I'm worried about Jean-Pierre.'

Joseph made a desperate effort to escape from Mexico, where he had never been and was firmly resolved never to go. Like a sleeper waking up with a start he said:

'Jean-Pierre? What's that you're saying about Jean-Pierre?'

'It's his exam. He'd done some bad paper work and he's dreadfully worried about it.'

Joseph's brow darkened. Definitely, everything was going badly in his kingdom. 'When shall we know the result?' he inquired.

'In a fortnight or less.'

Joseph thought of the election. It was due to take place in a very few days, on Saturday the 27th, to be exact. He made an effort to think of the election. It even occurred to him that if he had so violently sacrificed the Michoacan it was doubtless so as to be able to think with a freer mind about this famous election. He was about to speak of the election to Hélène, he was about to think aloud about his election before Hélène, when she said quite bluntly:

'That child is going to break down. You ought to give some thought to him. You ought to give him some sign of friendship, just a little affection.'

Then Joseph, filled with fury, thumped his fist on the table.

'To listen to you,' he thundered, 'one might suppose I had no heart, that I was a brute and a bully. And yet . . .'

At this Joseph stopped dead. A queer sensation came over him. His eyelids were hot and tingling, his breathing choked him. He thought: 'Surely I'm not going to start crying like an idiot! What on earth is making my eyes smart? I don't like it at all. Father used to cry like that, more or less without reason, when he was beginning to age. But he was seventy. I've still nineteen years ahead of me before I can allow tears to come in my eyes over silly trifles.'

He must at any cost shake off this morbid condition. As he rose from the table he decided that he would go down and spend a couple of days at Montredon, and if none of the family wished to go with him he would go alone. He would set out that same evening, or possibly in the afternoon, but he would have to look in beforehand at the rue du Quatre-Septembre, then at the rue Petrograd—and first of all at the

Bourse, where he seldom or never went—then put in an appearance at the auction rooms where four Matissees were being put up, then go and call on the chairman of the committee of importers of refrigerators, the worthy M. Perthuisot, and then sign all documents relating to the purchase of the Island of Mairan. Joseph declared that all this would only take him a couple of hours, three hours at the utmost, and that, once all those matters were cleared up, he would get into the car and be off to Montredon. He needed Montredon, that is to say, quiet, solitude, retirement.

In the midst of these fine plans Joseph suddenly remembered that he was due the very next day to attend the Argolides' luncheon. This was a luncheon which took place every month at the Cercle Interallié. It was a sort of club made up of members of the Institut and of the selected candidates, who could thus be inspected at close quarters and have their qualifications tested. Joseph could not possibly neglect the Argolides luncheon. In a fit of temper he decided not to start for Montredon until the evening of the next day, Saturday.

Hélène was no longer present to take part, even idly and indifferently, in these deliberations. Hélène had vanished, absorbed into space, sucked back into the whirl of Parisian life. And thereupon Joseph once more began to think about the Michoacan. In his lifetime he had encountered many shocks, hard blows, even real disasters; but never as yet had he lost eight hundred thousand francs at one go. For that, or very nearly, was the sum he had just flung away. Eight hundred thousand francs were not so very much in comparison with the whole. But the moment the vessel had sprung a leak serious enough to allow the escape of such a sum, all the rest would run out with the same speed and the whole ship would be in danger of going to the bottom. Joseph had certainly promised himself that he would never lose eight hundred thousand francs or even lose anything at all. He had certainly promised himself that he would be the only one who never lost anything. But from whom was he going to recover these eight hundred thousand francs? From whose pocket could

he lift them? On the other hand, was it possible to hold on to the Michoacan, this devouring enterprise which might in less than a year bleed him white, deprive him of his entire fortune? No, no, in spite of appearances he had acted wisely. But for such an operation to be considered salutary and decisive it should have a soothing effect, and Joseph was far from being soothed. He had promised himself that he would no longer think about the Michoacan, and he could see that it was wellnigh impossible for him to think of anything else.

He set about getting hold of his gloves and hat, and ringing to order the chauffeur and his car. Impossible to find the bowler hat he wanted. Impossible to lay hands on the gloves. Impossible, in fact, to concentrate his attention on even the simplest of actions. He stood for a long time in the hall. Then suddenly he called out in anguished tones:

'Arthur! Arthur! Answer the telephone; stop that infernal ringing.'

Arthur appeared and said in a firm voice that there was no telephone call and no bell was ringing at the moment.

Joseph stood bewildered, motionless as a statue. No bell? What then? Was it a buzzing in his ears? Or what? Sister Cécile's theme, perhaps? The theme of eternity?

XII

SATURDAY evening passed off tolerably well on the whole. He was just about to leave Paris, in fact he was actually getting into the car, when a reporter from the *Intransigeant* called to interview him on the subject of the Institut and his candidature. In his eagerness to escape from town he was about to give the man the slip when he bethought himself that one ought never to lose a chance of free publicity. It was not a question of getting one's money's worth. On the contrary, in this new world into which, five or six years ago, Joseph had made his way and which he pompously referred to as the world of intellect and the fine arts, one has only to

lift a little finger to get excellent publicity for the mere price of a lunch or a cup of tea, or, more often than not, without any payment whatsoever. So Joseph hooked the journalist by the arm and led him to the grand gallery which was hung with the works of those whom Joseph, showing off like a great peacock, proclaimed in his resonant voice to be 'the princes of modern painting.' He sent for some port, two glasses, and some biscuits. Then he began to monologize. 'I won't say anything about my candidature. Discretion is essential. . . .' After this preamble Joseph held forth for a good quarter of an hour on his candidature, his titles, his supporters, whom he praised to the skies, and his rivals, whom he dismissed with a snap of the fingers. He added a few weighty remarks on the wide diffusion abroad of the fame of our great corporate bodies. The interview ended with a hasty inspection of the works of the 'princes.' After which the journalist, who had a nice honest face and made some quite sensible comments, took leave of that distinguished economist and eminent art critic, M. Joseph Pasquier.

Joseph climbed into his car. As he grasped the steering-wheel he caught himself thinking: 'What luck! I'm free of the Michoacan.' Strangely enough this thought, which on the face of it was expressive of satisfaction and relief, and which, with slight variations, he had made at least a hundred times, once more brought on a painful constriction of the epigastrium, a sensation of discomfort verging on nausea. This must surely be a case of liver trouble.

Well, he grasped the wheel and went off at a good speed. As he made his way along the avenue de la Défense, which goes uphill, but is wide, and up which he always recklessly overtook all other cars, President Pasquier had the distinct feeling that the wretched worry which had been afflicting him over an insignificant oil deal had been left behind him and that this time he was quit of it for good. A little farther on, when he came to the bridge at Colombes, he had to slow down and even to stop. Immediately he realized that the Michoacan had caught up with him. It was like a dog one

was trying to lose. It could be outdistanced for a minute, but it had a good nose and always managed to find its master again. So it was throughout the journey. Four times over the Michoacan vanished into thin air with the exhaust gases and the purring of the motor. Four times over, Joseph, having to slow down, realized that the faithful hound was leaping round him once more, yapping and wagging an ironic tail.

In spite of the Saturday traffic Joseph reached Montredon in less than three-quarters of an hour. He was looking forward to the prospect of being alone there, of remaining alone there for a whole long week-end—at any rate until Monday noon—in the enjoyment of his property, his plans, and his leisure.

No sooner had he arrived than the squire of Montredon set about visiting the length and breadth of his domain; house, garden, park, and farm land. It was the season of the longest days of the year. The light of a stormy evening was still very bright. Treading this soil which belonged to him, touching those stones he had bought and which now somehow formed part of his being, gazing on these majestic trees, these lawns, these flowers, these fields which were his to wreck or destroy at pleasure, Joseph always experienced a voluptuous thrill. But on this particular evening, unfortunately, his pleasure was spoilt by a thousand little details which he could not fail to notice, for nothing could escape the watchful eye of the master. There were a couple of slates missing on the roof of the tower. 'How is it that you didn't see that? I give one look and notice it at once.' The chimney of the central heating, put in only four years ago, was allowing a trickle of coal tar to seep through and stain one of the walls. 'I've told you hundreds of times to have that wall painted every spring.' There was grass in the paths, as much grass as on the lawns. 'And how about the hundred kilos of chlorate of soda which you made me buy at a fabulous price? What do you do with it? . . . Make gunpowder, perhaps?' Then again there was ivy on a lime-tree, the finest of the

lime-trees, and mistletoe on the poplars. 'As for the poplars, I shall end by stripping them myself. It's only what I do myself that gets properly done.'

And so Joseph went striding about, his teeth grinding, his eyebrows in perpetual motion, his fists clenched, his cheeks furrowed by that painful grimace which he had long ago given up trying to control. The kitchen garden, however, gave him a few minutes' pleasure. There were some fine cabbages, handsome copper-coloured cabbages whose waxy leaves were untouched by slug or caterpillar. Joseph went up to the finest of them and stooped to admire it at leisure. The next moment he sprang back as if he had been bitten by an invisible snake: the Michoacan was there, coiled up on the head of the cabbage. The thought of the Michoacan had leapt at him like a ferocious wild beast.

Abandoning his fault-finding inspection he now went indoors to have his dinner. He was depressed to the point of bitterness and disgust. Above all, he had the feeling that the things to which he had given his life, all the effort of his life, might suddenly cease to please and divert him. He recalled the days of his youth: he had never been genuinely versatile, merely quickly tired of his pastimes and ever ready to explore some new way of exercising his body, his imagination, his strength.

He had looked forward to savouring his solitary meal with exceptional relish. But the service was on too large a scale, with dishes prepared for six or eight people at least. 'It's sheer waste!' he scolded. 'You were told beforehand that I should be dining alone.'

As though to bring a diversion to the meditations forced on him by his solitude, the telephone sounded towards the end of the meal. It was Blaise Delmuter, ever faithful to his post. He informed M. le Président that a telegram from Señor Obregon, sent by ship's wireless, had just been brought round from the rue Taitbout. Following instructions he had opened and read it.

'Yes, yes, and what does the miserable blighter say?' grumbled the Président.

The voice spoke again out of the murmuring distance. Señor Obregon said that he had asked by wireless for further information from Chipicuario. Stop. That he had received a preliminary telegram of a reassuring nature. Stop. That the fire was apparently under control. Stop. That he recommended waiting in patience.

Joseph burst out laughing. Obregon was still manœuvring, the scoundrel! Obregon fancied that Joseph would go on submitting to be drained of his money at the rate of twenty thousand and fifty thousand dollars at a time. Well, the milch-cow was refusing to yield any more. She'd just been dealing a damned good kick to that set of rascals. Look at the behaviour of that wretched Ravier-Gaufre! The way he had repeatedly tried, with that innocent air of his, to prevent Joseph from ridding himself in two shakes of this impossible business, this blood-sucking octopus, this voracious parasite of a business.

Joseph drank his coffee, sent the servants away, and pulled a writing-pad from his pocket. He immediately began to jot down in pencil, as he often did in moments of acute worry, a sort of inventory of his assets, of what he called his fortune. It was a very tricky job. The day before he had got the oldest of his helpers, the malodorous and faithful Mairesse-Miral, to prepare a balance-sheet. This only covered a part of his securities, for even to Mairesse-Miral Joseph did not confide everything. And in addition to the priced securities, the bills, deposited in banks and with brokers, there were also all sorts of things which Joseph kept in his own possession, in his coffers and safes. And to these must be added the specie, the bank accounts, the deposits abroad, the interests in all sorts of affairs which Joseph never mentioned to a soul; and when every effort had been made to add all this up, no doubt at least a third of the treasure had been overlooked. This amounted to a good many million francs, but as a matter of fact it was only a part, the non-material part, of the treasure. Now began the other chapter of the reckoning, the buildings, houses, lands, collections, hiding-places, and all that the

hiding-places contained. One mustn't forget to go down to the cellar to-night . . . Well then, with all that impressively substantial fortune, too involved and diversified to be ever really vulnerable, of what importance could this business of the Michoacan be? If, when all accounts were squared, including a liberal allowance for expenses, what could it really matter? Joseph was certainly big enough to drop a million, and with a smiling face, too.

So Joseph pulled a smile, but it puckered into a horrible grimace. No, certainly the Michoacan affair had no importance from the material point of view, but from the moral it was definitely alarming. Hour by hour it took on a symbolic significance. And there was no means of backing out, not with that ring of bloodsuckers. In any case no chance of backing out. The first signatures had already been given, and by next Wednesday everything would be clinched and settled in the presence of the notary. And lastly, and above all, Joseph was not seeking to regain possession of that infernal Michoacan. All he wanted was to forget it all. That was not so easy. First of all he must get some sleep.

Joseph gulped down three glasses of mirabelle. It was true that he had promised himself to keep off alcohol on account of that liver of his. Oh, well! Actual privations needn't start until to-morrow. What was essential now was a tolerable night. And mirabelle is not without its virtues.

His night did not start too badly. As he floundered in the first quagmires of sleep he said to himself: 'All 's going well! As a matter of fact, quite a good day. The Argolides' lunch was quite a good do. All those present will vote for me. They practically promised, some in so many words, others by a smile, and others again by a nod, or a shrug of the shoulders, or one of those hand-shakes that leave no doubt of their meaning. A good day! Good results at all our appointments. The mail? Quite satisfactory. That interview? Excellent. And here, solitude, repose, the contemplative life. Obregon gives me a sign of life just to let me see, once more, the sort of scoundrel he is. When all is said and done I'm lucky to

be out of it. Good riddance to the Michoacan. I don't give it another thought. Finished and done with, the Michoacan.'

After cursing the Michoacan, Joseph fell asleep with the thought that he was no longer thinking about the Michoacan.

He woke up suddenly in the middle of the night. Contrary to his usual habit he had gone to bed without first having been to inspect the secret vault, the *maflaba* full of chests and cupboards. He turned over on his other side in the hope of falling asleep again. Useless. At fifty-one a man begins to know his own disposition. So as to be done with the matter he decided to get up and go down and have a look round the vault. He slipped on a dressing-gown, felt slippers, and trousers, picked up his torch, and made his way into the passages. It was about two o'clock in the morning. All the servants' sleeping quarters were in the attics. There was no fear of his meeting any one during his expedition. Nevertheless, he set about it with extraordinary precautions. Opening and closing each door with extreme care, doing his utmost to avoid making the boards creak, and even holding his breath, he had less the appearance of the master moving about his own domain than of a furtive intruder bent on theft.

When at last he stood before the secret door, he breathed more freely and pulled out from his pocket the huge bunch of keys from which he never parted and which he always pressed with his left hand against his thigh to prevent all that ironmongery from jingling noticeably.

The key seemed to jam in the lock. Could it be that he was still so drugged with sleep that he could not even turn this key properly? And supposing it were not just sleepiness and clumsiness? What then? A sharp sweat broke out on his brow. No, no! He certainly wasn't asleep. Then, no mistake about it, someone had been tampering with the lock. Well then, what about it? Why, it was awful, damnable! And sending for a locksmith was quite out of the question. Any man who came along, no matter how honest he might be, would go away knowing everything. While taking off the lock he couldn't help seeing into the secret chamber. And

then there would be someone somewhere in the world who . . . As for those Italian workmen who had built the cellar, Joseph had told them that he intended to install shower-baths in it or turn it into a swimming-pool. Besides, they were a long way off. But anybody who was sent for now and saw the chests, the presses, and all the rest . . .

No! No! He wouldn't have a soul. He was handy and knowledgeable, he'd manage the job himself.

At that moment Joseph suddenly felt the key turning as it usually turned; the door was going to open. He restrained a sigh of relief. No, no relief: it was true the door opened, that was something; but someone had tampered with the lock, and someone had probably got into the secret chamber Joseph switched on the ceiling lights and examined the cellar under the blinding glare. Not a doubt about it: he didn't usually leave the arm-chair facing that way. Someone must have got in, and that was awful, damnable. What, then, had they stolen?

Feverishly he began to open the presses. Then he suddenly remembered that he hadn't closed the door as he usually did. But the idea of closing it and then possibly not being able to open it again—if really the lock wasn't behaving—the idea of being locked in without having any means of signalling his presence to the outside world, this idea made the sweat stream between his shoulder-blades. He contented himself with pushing the door to and then went back to his presses. He began to hunt at random, first for one object, and then for another, and never could find the treasure he was thinking of. He just had time to say to himself: 'There now! That's what they've taken, the pyx with the topazes,' and a moment later the pyx would turn up. Then Joseph would exclaim: 'No, it's the Byzantine cross I can't find. The swine! I ought to have my list. Where the devil is my list?'

The list was in Paris. For there was a list. Why didn't Joseph carry the list about with him, in one of his wallets? Oh, no, the list was a long one: it filled quite a thick notebook; besides, it was full of erasures and corrections. Joseph

couldn't live and go about his business, take the train or a plane, with this clumsy thing on him in addition to his bunch of keys, his wallets already stuffed full, his cheque-books, his pass-books, and heaven knows what besides. One shouldn't carry all these essential things about one's person; they should be carefully hidden.

Seated in the arm-chair, looking weary and puzzled, Joseph tried to recall one by one each item of his precious store. Useless efforts! He couldn't find the items that occurred to him, and he had long since forgotten the existence of most of those that came to hand.

He remained there for half an hour, filled with anxiety and uncertainty. He had another hide-out, less well equipped than this one, in that fine house of his at Mesnil-sur-Loire. He must go without delay and put in a day at Mesnil. How was it he never went now to Mesnil? And why did he never go to Beaulieu! It was just that he hadn't the time. A great deal of time is necessary if you are to possess a number of things, hold them in your grasp.

Possess! Yes, that was the master word. Joseph shrugged his shoulders when fools—and even members of his own family, let's say fools of his own family and leave it at that—looked upon him as a miser. A miser! But he was no miser. He was even open-handed, lavish! What he really was, was—how should one put it?—possessive. There was no other word for it. What he had was the instinct—very strongly developed, to be sure—of ownership, of personal proprietorship. What he rejoiced in was to seize in his own hands, to hold with his hands, the hands of the body or the hands of the mind, it was all the same.

He got back to his bedroom, harassed with anxious thoughts. The doors made some noise as they turned on their hinges. The servants would hear. Well, what about it? Let them! Then they'd know upstairs that the master was on his rounds in the dead of night. They'd know that, and it would scare them.

He flung himself into bed and found to his fury that the

Michoacan was lying in wait for him, there in the warmth under the golden coverlet. For the hundredth time he plunged into a reeling maze of figures. The Michoacan business was nothing at all. His fortune was still a fine, substantial fortune. Provided, of course, that the secret hoards were safe from thieves, for if not, all was lost.

As he could not manage to get to sleep he attempted to philosophize in his own way about the Michoacan. 'In the kind of life I lead,' he mused, 'everything is a matter of conviction. If I go about in my car with the mental certainty that nothing is going to happen to me, well, nothing does happen to me. But if, on the contrary, I get it into my head that the dynamo is going badly and isn't charging, well, it begins to go badly. Now at the rue Taitbout, on the first floor, there's a crazy plug. If I pull it without thinking, then it won't work. But if I pull it with the conviction that it's going to work, it flushes at once. One must think hard about what one is doing, bring one's will to bear on what one wants. The Michoacan I never did believe in. And it went phut in my hands. Serves me damn well right!'

This downright conclusion did not, however, bring sleep, so Joseph made a resolution that from the next day onwards he would cut down his diet and look after his liver, because it's fairly obvious that when a man is sick and bothered, uncertain, disgusted with everything and everybody, it's not his soul that is sick, it's his liver, just his liver.

At last he fell asleep just as the world was beginning to emerge from darkness.

If Saturday evening had passed off tolerably well, Sunday was decidedly so-so, not to say tiresome.

Quite early in the day Joseph had a telephone call from the Marquis de Janville. It was reassuring, optimistic, as cheery as a bugle-call, which was natural enough, come to think of it, for the marquis was an ex-cavalry officer. He laughed down the instrument: 'I shall have ten votes for you from my friends and ten from my opponents. That makes twenty. Out of that we can count on at least twelve. Then you your-

self, have got Pierquin and all his lot, you've got Peuch, you've got Pujol and Teyssèdre, who always vote together. That will make quite a comfortable majority. Only . . . 'Only,' repeated Joseph, his hands clammy, his throat constricted. 'Only, no false manoeuvres, no ill-considered steps, no slips, no imprudences. And, above all, no interviews. Just lie low until the twenty-seventh. . . .' And thereupon the marquis proceeded to talk about the weather. Joseph clenched his jaws, as an irrational terror suddenly chilled his very vitals.

No interviews! Of course, it was evident that no interviews must be given. The Marquis de Janville had warned him a hundred times not to give interviews, and M. Teyssèdre had given the same advice. It was only sense, any child could see that. And only the day before, his preposterous greed for publicity had rushed him into giving a particularly full interview. Well, he must prevent it from going through. It surely couldn't be too late.

Hanging on to the telephone for an hour, clinging like a drowning man to that beastly suburban telephone which only replies when it chooses, that is to say once out of ten times, Joseph Pasquier made desperate attempts to get through to the *Intran*. Not succeeding, he asked for the rue Taitbout, and after a lot of trouble managed to get it. But Blaise Delmuter had gone to church and would not be back till pretty late, possibly not till after twelve.

Joseph danced with rage. That young Blaise! He was always out when you wanted him. He'd give him what for.

He tried to comfort himself by thinking that there was still time to put matters right; he would go next day to the office of the *Intransigeant* and arrange with the editor, or even with the management itself, to have the article cut out. In short, there was no harm done.

He had his lunch alone and realized afresh that he was not cut out for solitude. He needed someone opposite him to listen to his complaints, admire his plans, or endure his reproaches.

By the middle of the afternoon, after an hour's unrefreshing nap, he made up his mind to go back to Paris at once to settle

the business and suppress the interview. In any case, everything at Montredon displeased him that day. All these beloved possessions, all these beloved things which he looked upon as the substance of his substance, the flesh of his flesh, all this now affected him only with an unconquerable disgust.

No sooner had he got into the car than he knew that he was taking back the Michoacan to Paris with him. It was ridiculous and yet it was a fact. A paltry million francs! He was strong enough to be let blood to that small extent without coming to harm. Hadn't he already a hundred times, a thousand times, gone over the ground and proved it by figures? But such proofs were of no avail. The Michoacan affair had got into his system, like some secret disease of the blood.

Passing through Corneilles-en-Parisis, he bought an *Intransigent*, and only just restrained himself from a howl of rage: the article occupied a quarter of the front page, with two photographs and a screaming headline: 'M. Joseph Pasquier, financial nabob, patron of the fine arts and first favourite for the Quai Conti stakes, gives us his plans.'

Joseph was so unnerved that he knocked down a cyclist at the Maillot cross-roads. Nothing serious; but a policeman came along and drew up a report. Joseph gnawed his lips in fury, saying to himself: 'Now it's my reflexes! That's the last straw. I shall consult Laurent about it. It's certainly not normal. I know that fool just flung himself at the car. But even so, this isn't normal. It's a question of reflexes.'

XIII

PATIENCE is a virtue which belongs to elementary beings, plants and stupid animals. The capable and courageous man does not await events, he goes to meet them, he challenges them. So thought Joseph, who for some time had no longer been able to distinguish very well between haste and promptness in action.

The appointment for the signing of the deeds had been fixed for Thursday morning. Joseph made such a pressing appeal on the telephone that M. Young and the notary agreed to sign as early as Tuesday. Joseph thought to himself: 'At any moment now we may hear that the Lucien well has caught fire in its turn, or that a general strike is preventing until further notice the boring of the new wells and the exploitation of the older ones. Of course the promise to sell is in itself binding, nevertheless it would make me look like a swindler just at the moment when one of the most illustrious institutions of this country is about to admit me among the number of its members.' That was one of the phrases which Joseph kept in readiness for the gentlemen of the press when they came to see him on the night of his election.

The meeting had therefore been advanced by forty-eight hours and Joseph experienced a sense of relief. He said to himself: 'It'll be finished sooner. It'll be over and done with. I shall only have to doctor this insignificant wound and then I can devote myself for the rest of the week to the business of my candidature, although the marquis declares that one has only got to fold one's arms and wait patiently. Wait! wait! That's the only word they ever utter.'

As Joseph was incapable of waiting he spent the whole of Monday in a thousand and one transactions, interventions, and general activities. He purchased the Island of Mairan with its factory, its thirty-five Bretons, and their houses. He took the chair at two board meetings, dictated some fifty letters, and had an interview with M. Perthuisot on the subject of the increase of the quota allowed by the minister. He even had time to look in at the auction-room and create a sensation by buying three pictures by Gretchenko at a figure that this 'prince of painting' had never yet reached.

The Tuesday meeting was fixed for the rue Taitbout at Joseph's request. The contracting parties being assembled, an incident occurred, trifling enough, it is true, but which nevertheless took Joseph quite by surprise.

M. Thomas Young had first of all retired to a corner of

the office, where he proceeded to confer in low tones with M. Ravier-Gaufre. Then the latter came over to Joseph, who was talking to the notary, and said with an ingratiating smile:

'Monsieur le Président, the deeds are all prepared and we are ready to sign them. M. Thomas Young, however, wishes to inform you that if there is a shadow of doubt in your mind, and if you should wish to go back on your decision, he would agree that this signature should not take place, and that the promise of sale should be null and void.'

As Joseph stared in surprise the big man added:

'M. Young thinks that during the whole of the discussion on Friday you looked somewhat disturbed, and that you might subsequently regret this transaction, and therefore . . .'

Flushing with anger, Joseph replied roughly: 'No question of such a thing. We are here to sign and we will sign straight away.'

M. Thomas Young nodded composedly and made a sign to his stenotypist, who had not missed a syllable from the beginning of this strange colloquy. Joseph thought to himself: 'That louse of a Ravier-Gaufre has just had a last shot at trying to prevent me from selling, now that everything has already been settled. Did you ever see the like? There's a fellow I'll keep my eye on if I ever find him crossing my path, though that's hardly likely, for he'll be on his guard, the sorry rascal!'

The notary then read through the contract. M. Young or Joseph sometimes broke in on this wearisome procedure to modify a word or strike out an article. Then each of the two appended his signature and Joseph was thereupon so greatly relieved that he had considerable trouble in restraining himself from laughing aloud.

The notary, M. Young, M. Ravier-Gaufre, and their respective acolytes retired in good order, leaving Joseph alone.

Like a child who has finished his homework and can now with delight go back to his favourite game, Joseph Pasquier immediately pulled from his pocket a tiny note-book and opened it at a certain page where there was a longish list of

surnames written in his own hand. He took out his fountain-pen and began to run through the list with a careful eye, stopping at certain names to indulge in various mental calculations. 'Janville,' he murmured, 'certain! Teyssèdre, certain! Pujol, certain! De Praz . . . Oh, de Praz, doubtful. . . .'

Before all the names qualified as 'certain,' Joseph Pasquier put a little tick, and before those which could be looked upon as doubtful it was a circle that this strange book-keeper drew with a peevish pen. As for those who must undoubtedly be reckoned as unshakable adversaries, they found themselves stigmatized with the proof-reader's sign of deletion. There remained the names of those he had not yet been able to reach, because they were ill or travelling abroad. Most of these would not even take part in the election. But even so they were factors in the reckoning, as dead weight, and Joseph as he noted them let out a disapproving growl.

Duchesnaye, certain! Maubec, certain! Lotz, doubtful Destrez . . . Oh, yes! Destrez must have got back to Paris yesterday and Joseph would go and see him in the early afternoon—a last-minute visit. . . . Come to think of it, the list with all those cabbalistic marks was barely readable. The best thing would be to recopy all these names in three columns. On the left, the true friends; on the right, the open enemies; in the middle, the lukewarm and the undecided.

Joseph recopied the names in three columns. And there were still a certain number of those names which refused to fit positively into any one of the three columns. He had first of all taken these for adversaries, then unexpectedly they had shown signs of friendliness, and then later he had heard of their saying the most poisonous things about him. Well then, what? They were neither certain, nor doubtful, nor hostile, they were wobblers who didn't know which leg to stand on and which course to steer.

Joseph had just reached this point in his delicate calculations when Blaise Delmuter came to tell him that he was wanted on the telephone. Joseph picked up the receiver with

the furious gesture of a player disturbed at his favourite game. No sooner had he put the receiver to his ear than he began to rage. This meant that they were double-crossing him. Why? Only the day before M. Perthuisot had assured him that everything would go smoothly and now, to-day . . . Indeed? The committee of importers of refrigerating plant had held a secret meeting? Well, well . . . was that so? and then these fine gentlemen had called on the minister? And what, might he ask, did the minister have to say? Here Joseph burst out laughing, at the same time lowering his voice. The minister had granted the licence. He couldn't withdraw it, and he certainly wouldn't do so. Joseph would have his own means of exerting pressure if by any chance . . . and he wouldn't hesitate to apply it. . . . What? these gentlemen of the committee insisted . . . Oh; they insisted on that, did they? Enough to make one laugh. Well, it remained to be seen. . . .

Joseph wrenched himself away from the instrument and shouted: 'My car, right away,' just as in bygone times a king of England had shouted on the battlefield: 'A horse! My kingdom for a horse.'

Joseph leapt into his car, and did not get back until a quarter-past two. He appeared exasperated, but he was hungry none the less. Hélène had already lunched. The children were not to be found. The servants had given up expecting Joseph. He had his meal served at the end of a table, an omelette of a dozen eggs and a portion of Livarot cheese. He drank a bottle of wine and then sent for Blaise Delmuter. No knowing where he had got to. There's another, definitely, who must be made to toe the line. Blaise Delmuter only put in an appearance at the moment when Joseph—black morning coat, pin-stripe trousers, tan pig-skin gloves—was preparing to get into his car again, this time attended by chauffeur and footman, to go and pay his official call on M. Destrez, member of the Institut. Blaise Delmuter having appeared, Joseph flung at his head, pell-mell, a heap of instructions, elucidations, and orders.

'The committee of importers of refrigerating plant went to see the minister yesterday. The minister is in a hole. He can't withdraw the licence he's given for three hundred tons of cryogen. But as the others, the competitors, are complaining, and as the minister can't, after all, give licences to every one, he had to find a way out. The solution is ridiculous. The licence will only apply to large-scale models. It's idiotic and disastrous, because all the cryos which are already at Saint-Nazaire or on their way across the sea at this moment are small-size, democratic models. . . .'

Blaise Delmuter went on with his notes, unmoved by his chief's exhibition of frenzy. Joseph proceeded to storm and splutter. 'We'll cable the Americans. Draft a cable which I'll see to presently. Models ten, eleven, and twelve only. That holds until further instructions. For the last two shipments, the one on the way and the one that's held up, I shall find a dodge. Otherwise it'll be a landslide! As for the minister, if he fails me, if he rats, he'll damn well have to to reckon with me. I've got him on toast, him and his impossible lentils. Now I'm going to that blighter Destrez, and I shall be back at once. Half an hour, three-quarters at most.'

Getting into his car he had time to contemplate the fact that he was now well quit of the Michoacan. The abscess had been drained. It was what one could call a radical operation.

Joseph did not get back until about five o'clock. He had come away highly pleased from M. Destrez. The worthy economist, as he escorted Joseph to the hall of his deserted, moth-eaten apartment, had actually said: 'I have read your two works, M. Pasquier. They interested me. Our company needs such men as you.' There! that was obviously a pledge. There was no mistaking it.

Entering his house with a quick step Joseph began rubbing his hands, having freed them for that purpose from their pig-skin sheaths. A candidature? He'd already been ten times a candidate for very different places. He had even stood for

the legislative elections and had succeeded splendidly. As a matter of fact, it was easy enough. It was only a question of bluff and money; and as to money, thank heaven, Joseph had got a political committee to see to that. No, he didn't recall having had any special difficulties in carrying the day. But the Institut was quite another matter. Confound it all. It really was a ticklish business. No matter, he'd get in. He'd show the others, Laurent, Cécile, Suzanne, you bet, that he too was among the intellectual masters of the time. To begin with, he would put down the name of M. Destrez in the 'certain' column.

He opened his note-book and set down, on the left, in a firm hand: Destrez.

For the tenth time perhaps, he was about to count and recount the names marked in each of the columns when he saw standing before him the figure of young Blaise Delmuter. On the icy face of the correctly attired secretary one could not fail to notice signs of unusual perturbation.

'Monsieur le Président,' he began, 'M. Trintignan is here. He wants to see you at once.'

'Right, right, let him wait a bit.'

'But, he says, monsieur le Président, that it's extremely urgent. The buyer from Antwerp is on the point . . .'

'On the point of what?'

'Monsieur le Président will forgive me if I repeat M. Trintignan's exact words: on the point offunking it.'

'Right, I'll see him at once.'

'He's in the small *salon*. It is perhaps better to inform monsieur le Président that there has just appeared in the first edition of the *Impartial* . . .'

'What? Another dirty little article?'

'No, unfortunately not a little one; but a big, a huge . . .'

'And that's the paper you're holding in your hand?'

'Yes, that is the paper, monsieur le Président.'

'Give it to me. Come along! Hand it over!'

Standing in the hall Joseph unfolded the pages of the *Impartial*. There in letters as large as franc pieces was the

heading: 'A scandal that may yet be averted.' The article began thus: 'Here on the very steps of the Institut is a man who for the last twenty years has played in the economic, political, and moral life of our country a role which we ought to recognize as evil and dangerous. . . .'

The article, which filled at least two columns, was entirely in that vein. Joseph went on reading, his face flushing angrily, his eyes almost out of his head. 'I'll sue them,' he thundered 'Get someone to call up Tonnelier, Maître Tonnelier. I'll smash the lot of them.'

Still standing on the same spot he carefully re-read the first part of the article and then said:

'That kind of people can be bought off. Don't call up Tonnelier for the present. I must have an interview with the directors of the paper. No. Try to find out who is in charge of the publicity department of the *Impartial*, and get him here, to-morrow morning. Understand?'

'Yes, monsieur le Président—but excuse me if I remind monsieur le Président that M. Trintignan is still waiting and insists on being seen at once'

'Right. I'll go and pick up Trintignan.'

For a whole hour by the clock, M. le Président Pasquier had a stormy scene with the Sieur Trintignan. The news was shattering. The Antwerp merchant was refusing to accept at the agreed price the three hundred tons of Cantal lentils for which he could find no buyers in Spain or even in Italy. Besides that, the Chule lentils which usually sell readily were in danger of being left on their hands, because the French market for the time being was glutted, as no one ate dried vegetables at that season of the year. Trintignan seemed genuinely disappointed and at his wits' end. Joseph made an appointment for the next morning, and was asking through his clenched teeth for a new offer when someone came to tell him that the Marquis de Janville was calling him on the telephone. Joseph immediately dropped Trintignan and rushed to the telephone.

The Marquis de Janville had just read the article in the

Impartial and was greatly upset. 'It's blackmail, of course; it's nothing but blackmail,' he said. 'But you're very much to blame for having granted an interview. I'd already warned you.'

Joseph excused himself, apologizing and stammering like a naughty schoolboy. Then the marquis added: 'And there are people here and there who accuse you of having inspired a campaign of calumny against your rival, M. Simionescault. It is said that he is assailed in all the papers where you have influence, so that as a matter of fact these attacks are as good as signed. It is rumoured that the paragraphs in the *Cri* can only come from you, that they are bound to come from you. You'd better walk carefully, old man. Apart from that, nothing to worry about. Our affairs are going along very well. Take it from me, success is certain.'

The conversation over, Joseph began to scratch his head. The article in the *Cri*? But there wasn't a soul besides himself and Blaise who was in the know. Who, then, could have squeaked? Aloud he said:

'The article in the *Cri*? But you and I, young Blaise, are the only ones who know anything about it. You haven't by any chance been silly enough to drop a word to any of your friends?'

'Monsieur le Président has no doubt forgotten,' said Blaise calmly, 'that he mentioned it himself last week at the dinner which he gave here in honour of M. Pujol and M. Teyssèdre.'

Joseph gathered all the wrinkles of his face together for a bitter meditation. And so it was he himself who had been fool enough to speak of his little doings to those two old geezers, those two idiots, those two inveterate gossips who rushed to spread the thing all over Paris. Foul! Foul!

He picked up his hat and a light overcoat. He would have dinner out and then afterwards . . . Yes, afterwards, well, he'd know what to do with himself. He was about to leave the house when he was informed that M. Sanasoff was in the large *salon* and was asking to see him. He replied bluntly:

'Tell him to go to hell. Go and tell him yourself, young Blaise.'

Blaise disappeared and returned almost at once to whisper in the ear of M. le Président:

'It's about the article in the *Impartial*. He says he knows someone.'

'Right,' said Joseph, with a shrug of the shoulders. 'I'll see him myself. Five minutes, not a second more. And he'll have got me once again.'

It turned out that Joseph remained an hour making arrangements with M. Sanasoff. At the end of that time he left the house. He did not go towards the rural heights of the little rue Ballu, but towards the heart of Paris. And he went on foot, as one who seeks to avoid traps and confuse his traces.

He pulled the copy of the *Impartial* out of his pocket and re-read the article, word by word, with the greatest care. He pondered: 'What does it all mean? In business I am most punctilious. Reliability personified. As a member of the Legislative Assembly I am a slave to my constituents. As an employer, a decent employer. I have had shower-baths installed at Montredon and in Paris for all my staff. I am a good father. I am even an over-indulgent father. I am a good husband, in spite of everything. Because, when all is said and done, there are faults on both sides. I, too, have reason to complain. And besides, that's none of their business. All that is my private life. So then? What can they have against me?'

Joseph replaced the paper in his left-hand pocket, then he took from his right-hand pocket a certain note-book where some dozens of names were carefully aligned in three columns. With the tip of his pencil he counted them up, twice over. And between his teeth he muttered: 'There will be thirty-four voters. Majority: ten votes. At the second round I shall have twenty-three votes. If Lépagnot turns up, I shall have twenty-three votes. There you are!'

He slipped the note-book back in his pocket, took a few steps, and muttered: 'I'm going to nab Fourdillat, pinch

Trintugnan, buy off the fellow at the *Impartial*. As for the Michoacan, complete deliverance. As for the others, blast them, what do I care?’

XIV

If it was a practical joke, well, that need only become apparent and the jokers would find out whom they had to deal with. If the joke took a turn for the worse it would always be possible to restore order. And Joseph with his left hand felt in his hip-pocket where lay a revolver of small calibre but first class, the steel of which called to mind the wing-cases of those brown and blue beetles which buzz about towards dusk in the copses at Montredon. In his right hand he gripped the gold knob of his favourite cane, which was as thick as a bludgeon and as supple as a riding switch.

Joseph was fifty-one, with some deeply scored wrinkles, with grey hair and eyebrows that he had no intention of dyeing; but he was strong and sturdy, and wonderfully adroit in the use of his limbs. At Montredon, at Le Mesnil, or on his farm in Normandy, when the labourers grumbled at a job, M. Joseph Pasquier would throw off his coat, roll up his shirt-sleeves, and set them an example, not without sarcasms, invectives, and imprecations. He was still capable of handling with ease a hogshead of cider, carrying on his back a sack of two hundredweight, extracting a cart from the mud by pushing at the wheel, felling by his unaided efforts a beech-tree as big round as a tower, and—to speak for a moment of his teeth—of drinking from a bucket half full of water, picking it up by the rim between his jaws, and then, with carefully controlled strength, tilting it to the requisite angle. Such was the man; and the jokers would do well to take warning.

If it wasn't a trick, then it remained only to find out what it really was. Joseph's affairs could be compared to a confused jungle of caverns, precipices, thorn-bushes, lianas, gloomy groves, deserts, and stagnant pools. There men fought one another, cheated one another, devoured one an-

other with horrid relish. It was all in the game. A game which could not be carried on, let it be understood, without treacheries, deceptions, machinations, and the tricks and stratagems of war. All this might bring Joseph to take steps in many directions, see any number of people, utter any number of words, imagine any number of tricks, it did not usually involve his standing motionless at the corner of a dull empty street, on a stormy evening, with his hat-brim pulled down over his face. No, this waiting about in the dusk was quite unlike what Joseph called his affairs. Well, then, was it politics? That might be. With politics, you never can tell. And if it was not politics, what could it be? This candidature? Well, maybe. For the last six or eight weeks Joseph had found himself, much to his secret dismay, transported into a climate that was new to him, but of whose temperature the filthy little papers that dealt in slander and blackmail gave him precise indications daily. Well, then, if it was not politics and if it was not concerned with the intrigues around this famous candidature, then he must cast about and think . . . yes, he must look things in the face and think of Miotte.

This name, Miotte, was charming. It had evolved from Hermine in some mysterious roundabout fashion. Joseph loved this pet name, although he quite realized that it was far from suitable to the character of the person in question. Miotte! It was playful, it was childish! Even in moments of demonstrativeness it was not in the least like that poised, intelligent woman. For Miotte was good sense personified. Possibly a shade too serious and calculating; but Joseph did not actually object to that. She was an excellent manager and ran the flat in the rue Ballu to perfection. No one knew better than she how to speak to servants and keep them up to their jobs. She gave Joseph a sense of security which a man laden with cares is thankful to find, particularly in his hours of relaxation. But after all she was only thirty. Never mind! Joseph had made up his mind to hold on to Miotte. When his thoughts turned to her he could feel rising within

him that strange lyrical impulse which not so long ago was wont to animate, uplift, carry out of himself the late head of the clan, the illustrious Doctor Pasquier. In this life of struggle, enterprise, and adventure which was Joseph's, Miotte represented the flowery reward, the snug haven, the conqueror's crown. He was twenty years older than she. And what of it? Pooh, what did that matter? He was quite equal to defending his own. He would wait, never flinching.

As the twilight faded under storm-clouds, suddenly all the street lamps were switched on. Joseph had to cross to the other pavement to find a zone of shadow. It was a sultry evening; he was sweating under his grey raincoat. He kept his eye on the door of number seven. Under the doorway the concierge, an old man, had taken his seat to smoke a pipe. His wife joined him, bringing a little chair. The minutes dragged on. The front of the block, with nearly all its windows still in darkness, was inscrutable. Every now and again Joseph could feel a wave of furious anger rising within him. Then he would go off into a confused train of thought. Those who thought that it would be easy to trip Joseph Pasquier up would assuredly have cause for repentance. He knew what he was about. He knew what he wanted. The inspiration that had caused him to drop the Michoacan was at the same time irresistible and deliberate. It had been necessary to throw out ballast, so as to remain agile and unencumbered in the stupendous race he was running. As for the rest, his jaws were clenched and his fists were hard. And then, too, he had a love of life itself, to-day more than ever, in spite of an occasional weariness which was merely the natural outcome of much experience. . . . Ah!

In the doorway there appeared a woman's silhouette, tall, well-shaped. Then immediately, next to it, another shadow, more slender in outline, a man's. All this had lasted only a moment and already the two figures were on their way, fading in the dusk of the Parisian night. All this had lasted only a moment, but Joseph had seen quite clearly what he had to see, without the least chance of a mistake.

Rush off in pursuit? No, that would never do. He must first get a grip on himself. He must first use his handkerchief to get rid of this extraordinary flood of sweat that was pouring down his cheeks, then he must unclench these fists, straighten out these knotted fingers, and then master this trembling in the calf of his leg, this trembling that threatened to invade his whole body. And then, what else was he to do?—Well, he must think it over, think it over, always bearing in mind that before making the slightest decision, proofs would be necessary. Proofs!

At that moment it began to rain and the great man realized that if he remained there a few minutes longer he would very soon cut a very poor figure and that in the sequel he would run the risk of losing all prestige, all assurance, and possibly even the most elementary self-control.

To approach those marionettes, the concierge and his spouse, two methods were possible; he could decide at the last moment which was the better. He opened his wallet. In his left hand he took a hundred-franc note—it was rather a lot, but nothing venture, nothing have—in his right, a police card, a sort of pass which he sometimes made use of to scare the simple-minded. Then only did he set about emerging from the shadow and making contact.

The man who a quarter of an hour later was crossing the place du Panthéon under a tropical shower was engrossed in laying out plans of campaign.

His police card had had a magical effect and Président Pasquier now had all the information he needed. He certainly was not tipsy. He had dined early, at least two hours ago and in the most sober fashion, at a grill on the right bank. But he could not walk straight, and when he had actually managed the crossing and reached the walls of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, he put out a sopping wet glove in search of some support, or at least some reassurance that the world was solid.

Hurrying along he dashed down the rue Saint-Jacques, now

transformed into a torrent, growling threats and mad abuse as he went. So this was what was going on! This was what he got; working himself to death, he was surrounded all the time with traitors. Well, he would take the axe, and cut everything clean out of his life, rip every link, break every chain. No, never had he deserved such a fate. He had been feeding a swarm of greedy parasites, but they wouldn't fool him again for all eternity.

Near the Cluny Museum he made his way into a bar he knew of. Streaming with rain he hoisted himself on a stool and ordered a cognac. When the barman offered him a small glass, he indicated with a gesture that he wanted a larger one. He was given brandy in a claret glass. He drank as thirsty children and rustic toppers do, with a noisy sucking sound.

He seldom went out without one of his cars. Now he felt himself suddenly at a loss, half paralysed. None the less, he decided that he would go home on foot and walk off his rage, and with the exercise shake the disarray of his thoughts into some sort of order.

It was half-past eleven when he reached the rue Taitbout. It looked to him as if the light was shining through the closed shutters of the first-floor windows. Well! he'd lots of time. Sit down for a bit, and try to think.

In the hall he shed his streaming raincoat, shapeless hat, gloves, and gold-knobbed cane. Then he went to his office. The house seemed to be asleep. He switched on the light and staggered to the arm-chair at his desk. Under the brass paper-weight, but well in evidence, was displayed a cable-gram. The paper-weight hid the greater part of the message. But the last few words were visible, and the signature: Obregon.

'Oh, no, no!' groaned Joseph. 'The Michoacan is done with! Now here's another trouble, and thank heaven it has nothing to do with the Michoacan. There's only one thing I ask of that swine of an Obregon, and that is to leave me in peace. In peace! Once and for all!'

In spite of this declaration he removed the paper-weight

and read the cable. It was a marconigram. It was dated from the ship and ran into ten or twelve lines. Joseph, who at first looked at it absent-mindedly, suddenly tugged at it so hard that he almost tore it apart

'Pleased to report good news received from Chipicuario
Stop Fire limited to store number six Stop Well number
six in full flow, twelve hundred barrels Stop Well number
seven yielding oil under pressure at two hundred feet Stop
Law case won after appeal Stop Writing shortly

OBREGON.'

This message read and carefully re-read, Joseph let his chin drop against his chest. His impulse was to give vent to a roar of rage, but he was too far exhausted to summon up enough breath for such an effort. So he had been tricked, he, Joseph, the master of every trick! He had been duped, trapped, and for the second time had lost the game. Like a simpleton, like an idiot, he had sold a magnificent concession, that from to-morrow would rank as the pearl of all business concerns. They had tricked him? No . . . they hadn't tricked him. That was the worst of it. Nobody had tricked him. Ravier-Gaufre had even tried to persuade him not to sell. Even Young himself, the buyer, had tried to persuade him not to sell. Obregon? The case of Obregon was even more disquieting in its apparent simplicity. From the first Joseph had been suspicious of Obregon. By instinct from the first day Joseph had smelt the rogue in Obregon. And now the rogue turned out to be an honest man. When a fellow whom one looks upon as a rogue behaves like an honest man it is the dirtiest of tricks, it is above all the least pardonable of tricks, because you can no longer tell where you are. And this dreadful blow had fallen on him at the most painful, the most tragic moment of his stormy career. He had thought himself quit of the Michoacan, freed by the knife from that tumour, and here he was doomed to suffer from it in the days to come more severely than he had already done. It was likely, it was even certain, that the affair would not remain

a secret among the five or six people concerned in the deal. From to-morrow the story would run from mouth to mouth. How people would gloat! He, Joseph, would be the laughing-stock of all Paris. Well, then, he was done for, down and out. There was nothing left for him but to go and plant turnips on one of his properties, provided, of course, that he sold all the others, for there is nothing that swallows up money more greedily than all these belongings which you think you own, but which in reality own you and for which you have to work like a cart-horse, a slave. And all this was falling on him at what a moment, good heavens!—at the very moment when he was about to be forced to engage in an atrocious wrangle, to slash to the bone, to set his teeth in the living flesh.

This could not be undertaken in a hurry. He was a strong fellow, to be sure, but to-night it was all he could do to stand upright.

He stood up just to prove to himself that he was abnormally tired and weak. In particular that cramp in his right calf was certainly not due to liver. He believed he had heard that it was more likely to be kidneys. That would mean albumin. He 'd end up by dying of dropsy, alone in a corner. For he 'd die all alone, like a sick old wolf.

He went through to his bedroom on tiptoe, undressed, and immediately jumped into bed without even washing. To go into the bathroom, turn on taps, run water, all that would attract Hélène's attention, if she happened to be at home. He flashed his bed-light for a second to look at his watch. It was one o'clock. He must have stayed a long time in his office pondering over the cable from that wretched Obregon.

With his mouth open and all his muscles relaxed so as to secure as complete a silence as possible, for the muscles of the jaws make an audible sound as they contract, he listened for the sounds from the neighbouring room which could reach him through the bathroom. Several times he fancied that he could catch that distinctive faint sound that a reader makes in turning the pages of a book. He listened, burning with the

furious flames of anger. He had only to go downstairs and fetch his cane, and he could rush in, strike, execute justice. The idea of such a ridiculous scene, the picture of this punitive expedition in pyjamas, made him shrug his shoulders. No, he'd be very cold, very measured in his words, impassive as a judge, as an executioner.

Just before dawn, however, he felt his way, bare-footed, down to his office, not to fetch his gold-knobbed cane, but to pick up the telephone. With a hesitating finger he dialled his brother Laurent's number and waited a long time before getting any reply. At last an anxious voice came through. 'Who's that? What do you want?' He answered: 'It's me, Joseph!' Then his brother's voice replied: 'What's the matter? Are you ill?' . . . 'No, I'm not ill.' . . . 'Well, then?' . . . 'Well, then, I don't quite know.' There was an interval of silence, then the far-away voice said: 'You're not ill. Then what is it you want? Are you unhappy about something?' . . . 'Unhappy? No. . . . I don't think so Laurent, I just can't sleep.' Then he repeated pitifully: 'Make me sleep, Laurent!'

Then Laurent said a few soothing things. This was not the first time that Joseph had disturbed him thus in the depths of the night just because he couldn't get to sleep. By the next day he would barely remember it and hardly apologize. He would say: 'After all, you're a doctor. I know, of course, that you're a laboratory doctor. But that doesn't matter. You're in duty bound to serve humanity.'

So Laurent spoke a few words of comfort and gave some good advice. After which Joseph went back to bed and turned over in his mind what he would say and do when the new day dawned.

He took some deep breaths, and solemnly counted up to a thousand, as Laurent had advised. Little by little a monotonous whistling sound, coming from the depths of the past, found its way into the recesses of his being and dispersed all thoughts of anger and revenge. Little by little the theme of eternity resumed possession of this troubled soul. So

completely, indeed, that towards daylight Joseph sank into¹ a dreadful slumber, a slumber as dense and black and viscid as is, it seems, the crude oil in the bowels of the earth.

XV

HE was on his feet by eight o'clock and went and planted himself in front of the mirror. He was perfectly fit, ready to attack, ready to strike. It was Joseph complete and intact from top to toe, as before and as ever.

He went into the bathroom, locked himself in, took a cold shower, shaved himself closely, and then went back to his room and dressed at leisure. His breakfast tray of chocolate and brioches had just been brought up. He ate his whole ration, which was no small one. The last mouthful swallowed, he called out, very loudly.

'Hélène!'

A sleepy voice answered from afar:

'Yes, what do you want?'

And so she was asleep! She could sleep! Shamelessly she gave herself up to the luxury of slumber! He called out.

'I wish to speak to you, Hélène.'

'Really? Well, wait a moment and I'll slip on a dressing-gown, and then you can come in.'

'No, dress yourself.'

'What for?'

'I'll explain presently.'

'You know it'll take me an hour.'

'Well then, take an hour.'

He raised his voice so as to make himself heard, but he was keeping his anger in check. He intended to control himself as long as he could. His anger would perhaps be suddenly unsheathed at the appropriate moment, like a flashing sword. Meanwhile, calm! Meanwhile, the greatest possible calm!

He added:

'I'm going to do some work; I'll be back in an hour.'

He went down to the floor below and found once more on his desk the cable from Obregon. This wretched business of the Michoacan, what a distorted view he had taken of it the night before! He, Joseph, to become the laughing-stock of Paris over this absurd affair! He certainly had nothing to fear. He had formed the opinion that the Michoacan was a bad investment. Well, then, cost what it might, it was going to turn out a damnable investment. Joseph had enough connections, enough tricks up his sleeve, to settle the hash of those rotters. The well hadn't yet caught fire, but it still could do so. The last word must be, as always, with Joseph.

He was just on the point of summoning Blaise Delmuter, who would be in his room, or somewhere having his breakfast. But he decided that it would be preferable to keep quiet and remain alone to ponder his grievances and prepare his indictment. As time hung on his hands he went up into the picture gallery and began to stride up and down. He repeated absent-mindedly the famous familiar names: Cézanne, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Odilon Redon, etc. . . . Then he stopped dead in front of a canvas by Gretchenko. 'These fellows were not going to have the laugh on him any longer with their pretentious fashion of slapping paint on canvas. It was all humbug! He would get rid of the lot. After that, he'd be the one to laugh.'

He had a great inclination to launch a big kick at the portrait of Orpheus, aiming especially at the jaws of the crocodile, which seemed stupid to him. But the picture was too high up, and in any case he had made up his mind to sell it. The pleasure of a kick isn't worth forty thousand francs. He looked at his watch and went up to his bedroom.

There was an animal smell about the room, for the night before he had forgotten to open the windows. That didn't offend him. He called out:

'Are you ready, Hélène?'

She replied:

'Another five minutes.'

So saying she began to whistle. As a matter of fact she

whistled very well. She dared to whistle! It really was the limit of insensitiveness. Never mind! He would bide his time.

Five minutes went by and H  l  ne said tranquilly:

'Come in.'

He went straight in. H  l  ne was dressed, as he had requested. She was wearing a tailor-made, one of those masculine tailor-mades which she particularly fancied. She held herself very straight, and she was still handsome in spite of her forty-eight years, with her fresh complexion, her healthy mouth with its firm and flexible lips and good teeth, and her well-shaped legs, which she was not shy of revealing. Joseph had time to note all this, but he was moved by his resentment and attacked forthwith. He said, weighing his words carefully:

'At ten o'clock last night I went over there, to that little street near the Panth  on. You! So it was you!'

He had prepared this attack which seemed to him direct without being melodramatic. He was sure that he would see H  l  ne stagger, change colour, and fall into a chair. She did, as a matter of fact, sit in a chair, but she certainly didn't fall into it. After which she replied coolly:

'Certainly it was me. Did you by any chance fear that it would be someone else?'

This reply took him on the left cheek like a blow from a fist, and it was he who nearly staggered. The business was beginning badly. He must find some other method. He exclaimed:

'Have you no shame?'

He had raised his voice without losing his temper.

H  l  ne shook her head and answered squarely:

'For the last four years I have done my utmost to spare you any scenes of jealousy. On that score you have nothing to reproach me with. I expected reciprocal consideration on your part, as it seems that neither you nor I are blind, my poor friend.'

Reciprocal consideration! Nothing to reproach her with! Joseph squinted a little, catching sight of the tip of his nose which was beginning to turn white. The quarrel was going badly. Well, then, he'd beat her. He'd beat H  l  ne with

his fists and his feet. Ah, what a relief it would be! And as she would certainly not submit without retaliating, the whole affair would take a disgusting turn. Never mind that. He had to beat her. He had to break something, smash the furniture, knock down the walls. The house would crash down on them and their rage. Well, let it crash! Let it crash! Let the whole world crash!

At that moment he must have looked really dangerous, for Hélène rose to her feet and backed a little. Then he grasped the big citron-wood cheval-glass in his arms and planted it straight in front of her, shouting:

‘But look at yourself! Just look at yourself!’

She made a gesture of calm resignation.

‘Oh, I know myself,’ she said

‘Look, wretched woman’

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed:

‘I know what I should see. Now, that’ll do.’

He was disconcerted. How clever she was! And he had gone and sought her out in the days gone by, in that Sorbonne which he instinctively hated. He, who so early in life had turned away from cultural interests, had gone and chosen his wife from the very temple of that cursed culture. She always intimidated him when she looked at him like that, with that attentive gaze. In spite of everything she intimidated him. He wouldn’t be able to beat her. At first he had hoped to reduce her to tears. But not a bit of it, she wouldn’t cry. She wouldn’t even cry. The quarrel was becoming a wretchedly vague affair, and might even fizzle out completely, without achieving a clear solution. He must think of some other way. But it was Hélène who took it upon herself to speak. She said:

‘I’ll do whatever you wish. It’s all the same to me.’

‘Are you intending to pose as the victim?’

‘Oh!’ she sighed, ‘at this moment we are all wretched victims.’

‘Victims of whom or what?’

‘Of something frightful, some intensely bitter quality that resides in you, my poor Joseph, which one may not be able to define, but from which one suffers all the same.’

Then he raised his arms and began to weep. He had hit on the right vein; in a flood of complaints he would find relief. For a quarter of a century he had been engaged in a super-human effort. He had killed himself with work. And how had it all ended? In this shipwreck. Really it was unjust! He had three children for whose future he worked like an ox, and to-day those three children didn't even look at him, didn't understand him, had no affection for him. It was unjust, it was more than unjust! He had done all that a man can do for his wife, for his wife's happiness, and she had waited till she was on the threshold of old age—yes, the threshold of old age—to attempt to shame him, to render him ridiculous. Oh, it was the limit of injustice! But at least, since yesterday, the situation was clarified. Hélène had risked everything. Well then, she must forfeit everything.

Hélène listened to this long-drawn lamentation mingled with threats, merely shaking her head occasionally in denial. In a momentary silence she said in level tones:

'For the last twenty years you have deprived me, little by little, of my most precious possession.'

'And what was that?'

She inclined her head sadly.

'Perhaps the sense of life.'

They remained face to face, in silence. Joseph once more was completely nonplussed. Nothing in this scene had turned out as he had expected. He had first of all imagined a quarrel in the grand manner, something fine, with loud voices, set speeches, prostrations, and punishments. He had got ready some stinging words, vengeful phrases. He wanted to use the expression 'unworthy spouse.' He even wanted to speak of 'discreditable caprices,' 'perverted tastes,' 'paramour.' And all these words stuck in his throat. And every effect miscarried. He had foreseen many possibilities, but not that of encountering such an adversary as this, so stubborn, so insolent, so calm, so despairingly calm. It was she who now grasped the helm, saying sharply:

'I suppose you have thought over the conditions of the divorce.'

The word roused him. If divorce was mentioned, business might be done. He was now in his own domain. He replied immediately:

'Certainly. I have foreseen everything.'

'Well, you 're lucky.'

He did not seem to savour the ironical homage contained in this remark.

'When will you be leaving this house?' he asked.

'In five minutes at the latest.'

'Yes? And do you know where to go?'

'I know where to go.'

When a bitter smile scored his left cheek she added swiftly:

'Oh, no, not what you 're thinking of. No, you 'll see, it 's very simple. I 'll let you know in the afternoon where I have elected domicile; that 's what they call it, and we may as well get used to the language'

'The children will remain here,' he went on, 'as is only natural.'

'Don't be in a hurry to believe that. Two of the children are already of age and they will do as they think fit. I will ask Delphine to come with me, or rather to come to me, possibly this evening. No one can prevent her, she is twenty-two.'

'Jean-Pierre, being still a minor, will remain under my roof.'

'You 're talking as if the case was going to be decided in your favour.'

'I haven't the least doubt that it will be. You know I have my witnesses.'

'You don't seem to understand that I may also have mine. It doesn't seem to have occurred to you that if I am at fault, you 're not blameless either, and that I have all the necessary information.'

'In that case we can get a divorce on reciprocal torts. And since our marriage settlements are under the system of joint possession restricted to property acquired in common . . .'

'All that is a matter of indifference to me. You can never guess how little I care.'

'You had no money when you married, but fifteen years ago you inherited two hundred thousand francs from your uncle Strohl of Nancy, that amount will come back to you, plus the accumulated interest.'

'I thought I had already told you that I simply don't care.'

'I wouldn't be so positive if I were you. One always needs money.'

'What I need is never to hear money talked about again.'

'Can I drive you anywhere? I'll put one of the cars at your disposal.'

'No, thanks. I'll go away on foot, and empty-handed. I'll have some linen and a few clothes brought along by Delphine this afternoon.'

'What are you going to say to that child? What sort of explanation do you think you can give her?'

Hélène clasped her hands together, bent her head, and said thoughtfully:

'I shall do my best not to lie to her. I shall learn to be humble. Possibly something will turn up which will make it easier for me.'

She opened a wardrobe and took out a hat; then she chose a pair of gloves, with the air of one whose thoughts are far away.

Joseph walked up and down, his hands in his pockets. Then he said in a shaky voice:

'You can perfectly well remain here another twenty-four hours.'

Hélène shrugged her shoulders.

'Couldn't think of it, my friend.'

And thereupon in three long strides, her leather hand-bag tucked under her arm, Hélène walked out of the room.

She had been gone a full minute when Joseph, awaking from his nightmare, called out:

'Hélène!'

It was the cry of a drowning man, the cry of a man swimming alone among the billows on the high seas.

But hardly had the cry escaped him when Joseph pulled himself up; events had turned out according to plan.

He had sworn that he would use the axe, that he would cut into the very flesh, that he would hack out what was dead or infected. And that was what he was doing. And now he would go back to work.

He went into the passage and immediately called out:

'Blaise! Where's Blaise? Get me M. Delmuter. I'm waiting for him in my office.'

XVI

BLAISE DELMUTER was not in the secretary's office, a grim room in which a female stenographer who also looked after the switchboard toiled all day. Blaise wasn't in the library, neither was he in the picture gallery. Nor was he in his bedroom at the top of the house, between Jean-Pierre's and the servants' bedrooms. It remained to inquire by telephone whether the chief secretary had turned up at the office in the rue du Quatre-Septembre. No, he hadn't been seen there. Well then, was he with M. Mairesse-Miral at the office in the rue Petrograd? No, M. Mairesse-Miral had not had the honour of a visit from M. Delmuter. Then, was his young lordship at his dentist's or where? He ought to have informed his chief. He was going to get it hot.

Here Joseph paused, standing at an open door, and the idea flashed across him: A revolution in his life! And what a revolution! Once more he had wielded the axe, and the operation had been miraculously successful. He didn't even feel the sort of discomfort that a suppression of anger always caused him. That was what you could call character.

The female from the secretary's office came to tell M. le Président that he was wanted on the telephone.

'Who is it?' he snapped.

'A Monsieur Passèdre, or Proussèdre, I didn't quite catch.'

'Don't know him. Leave me alone. Say I'm out.'

The female was just disappearing when Joseph stopped her. 'Wait. One never knows. It seems to remind me of something. Put the call through into my room.'

He went into his office and picked up the instrument. He didn't look as if he was going to allow himself to be badgered. And suddenly that angry brow of his was smoothed as if by magic and he said in honeyed tones:

'How are you, *mon cher maître et ami*? And how is Mme Teyssède? My secretary, who never gets names, completely muddled yours, although it's so well known and easy to remember. . . . What's that you say? My God, surely not! Yes, it's not absolutely certain? A slight stroke? But nothing serious? Do you think one could telephone to Mme de Janville? It wouldn't be tactless, would it? Well, thank you very much. I'll inquire at once. I'm deeply concerned, more deeply than I can say.'

With a shaky hand Joseph replaced the receiver. He took two or three turns round the room, carefully stepping on a particular part of the pattern of the carpet, a sure sign with him of very great perturbation. God! it only needed that! The old Marquis de Janville had taken it into his head to have a stroke. Two days before the election. And it had been known since the day before, and everybody was talking about it at the Volney, the marquis's club. It had been talked about since the day before, and meanwhile he, Joseph, had had to wield the axe in his own house, the headsman's axe, no less. The first thing was to make certain. Before starting to worry, find out for certain. With these rumours that fly about Paris, one never knew.

He picked up the telephone again and asked for the Janvilles' residence. The number was engaged. He waited five minutes and tried again. The number was still engaged. It didn't definitely mean anything, but it was not a good sign. There wasn't usually so much telephoning going on at the Janvilles'. At the third try, he at last got a reply: Mme la marquise couldn't herself come to the telephone. As for M. le marquis, he was ailing, yes, ailing, oh, merely a case

of gastric flu, just a mild attack. The marquis sent his apologies. It would only be a matter of a week or two, not more, so the doctors said.

A week or two! That was already far too long! Gastric flu! That certainly shouldn't prevent a decent man from getting on his feet for an hour to go to the Institut. For in this intricate business the Marquis de Janville was comparable to the conductor of an orchestra: if he should fail to appear the whole set-up was in jeopardy. At the very least, there was a danger that the affair would not appear in such a favourable light.

Joseph thought that the best thing was to call up Teyssèdre once more. He got him almost at once: 'I've just telephoned the avenue Hoche. The news is reassuring. The person who replied to me said something about gastric flu. That's something fairly mild. The marquis is quite tough. Surely he's the sort of man who could be up the day after to-morrow to attend the Institut. What do you think, cher maître et ami?'

After a slight pause the voice of M. Teyssèdre was heard to say: 'You surprise me. I've seen Professor Rohner, who is a friend of the marquis. In his own words it is a right-handed hemiplegia, with some affection of the organs of speech. . . . Yes, I repeat: right-handed hemiplegia. It's certainly very distressing. But, come, the fight isn't over. Your position still seems to me excellent. Cheer up; see you again soon!'

Barely had he rung off when Joseph flew into a rage. That idiot of a Janville was going to mess up everything with this silly stroke. It was incredible that nothing could be done in such a case. He'd call back Teyssèdre.

He did call back Teyssèdre. The worthy historian had long been accustomed to the panicking of candidates. Plenty of them had sat fretting and chafing as they waited in his quiet little drawing-room with its slender Louis XVI chairs. The sight of their persistence no longer caused him any surprise, but rather a feeling of melancholy touched with compassion. He made a sincere effort to listen to Joseph, in spite of the

preposterousness of what he was saying. 'If the Marquis de Janville is ill, can I count on you, mon cher maître et ami, to have the election postponed, say, for a fortnight?'

Out of the muffled depths of space came M. Teyssèdre's horrified voice: 'Postpone an election because a member happens to be ill! But, my dear sir, it's unthinkable! Such a thing has never been done'

'But,' stammered Joseph obstinately, 'this makes nonsense of the whole competition. Just because of an illness I lose my most valuable supporter.'

'Oh!' expostulated the shocked historian, 'you have certainly others. . . . Postpone for a fortnight! But, my dear sir, even were such a course possible, and let me say again that it is quite out of the question, in a fortnight's time there won't be a soul left in Paris. And then it wouldn't be one vote that you would risk losing, but possibly ten. Once more, don't worry!'

Joseph grabbed at his hair with both hands. He had just made an awful *faux pas*, two indeed. First in insisting so fiercely. Secondly in referring to his most important supporter while speaking to another elector. And how on earth could he put that right? Decidedly it was a tricky business dealing with these old fogies of the Institut. Joseph was certainly more in his element when it was a question of sending a business man to the right-about, or even—yes, even when it came to wielding an axe, hacking at his own life, separating from his wife, for instance. For he was going to have a divorce, he, Joseph! And a good thing too.

He called up Pujol. That distinguished economist was one of those who had said to Joseph: 'Call me up if ever you need me.' He certainly wasn't on that footing with all the others. Apart from eight or ten whom he had a right to regard as staunch friends, to the others he must communicate by letter. A certain formality must be observed.

Pujol, that morning, was full of optimism, even jovial. He wouldn't allow Joseph to plead at length. He laughed into the receiver: 'A stroke! Oh, my dear fellow, that's nothing

at all. Janville will pull out of it quite easily. Why, look at Peuch! Look at de Praz! They recovered all right. As for your affair, nothing to worry about! I tell you your chance is quite safe. You were to have had twenty-three votes; well, you'll have twenty-two. And that will still be very good. Look at me; in 1905 I got in on the third ballot with seventeen votes only. Well, then? Keep in touch with your friends, nevertheless.'

Joseph was relieved but not reassured. He still had two days in which to make his final calls. Oh, all this was happening at a most unlucky moment. It was already half-past twelve and Hélène had not yet sent any message. Hélène had gone off like that with her hand-bag tucked under her arm. She was naturally secretive and capable of taking revenge. But revenge on whom? And for what? For the injury she had done him, the unfortunate Joseph?

Now to get hold of the elusive Blaise. Joseph himself set about the search, and after exploring the house and inquiring for the second time at the offices in the rue du Quatre-Septembre and the rue de Petrograd he decided that it would be advisable to investigate the young man's bedroom.

The key was in the door. Joseph went in, without knocking. The room was small and very tidy. Its whole contents could be taken in at a glance. The furniture was in its place, but the wardrobe was open and completely empty. On the floor in a corner was a good-sized trunk, locked and labelled. Lastly, on the table, conspicuously displayed in a good light, Joseph caught sight of a letter addressed 'To M. Joseph Pasquier.'

The envelope was sealed. Showing signs of irritation, Joseph picked it up and opened it. He began to read it as he went downstairs.

'Paris, 24th June, 1925.'

'MONSIEUR LE PRÉSIDENT,

'It is ten o'clock in the evening. In all probability you are at this moment at the corner of the rue Thouin and the rue Blainville, in the fifth arrondissement. I give you this

precise detail, so that you may know that the man you refer to so genially as "young Blaise" does not write anonymous letters. But he may find himself under the necessity of deferring his signature. Please be good enough to appreciate the distinction.

'I have the whole evening at my disposal to write my letter, a letter I have been dreaming about for at least two years, that is to say from the very moment when I began working under your orders. You will be back here about eleven o'clock if there is no scene of violence, over there, in the fifth arrondissement. But there won't be any scene of violence. I can rely, monsieur le Président, on that good sense of which you have so often given me the proof, and which must still be quite strong within you in spite of certain weaknesses which I shall allow myself the pleasure of referring to this evening, if you will be so good as to give me a little of your attention.

'I have, then, the whole evening before me. A free evening, when I need not fear that I shall hear myself summoned twenty times: "Blaise! Where's Blaise! What's Blaise doing?" An evening during which I am firmly resolved to let the telephone ring as much as it pleases without even rising from my chair. An evening which I intend to devote to reverent preparation for the joys of deliverance.

'During these two years of intimate collaboration you have done me considerable harm and a little good. It is in recognition of this good that I am going to open my heart to you now that I am leaving you. For I am now leaving you, monsieur le Président, and, in order to cut short effusive farewells and avoid useless recriminations and superfluous leave-takings, I shall go off to-morrow morning, at dawn, without seeing you, and even without having to hear once more in the corridors: "Where's Blaise? Get me Blaise this minute!"

'What has made me decide to hasten this rupture which I've been thinking over for some time, is not, monsieur le Président, your terrible temper. In writing these two words,

I am aware I shall give you pleasure. For I have noted, monsieur le Président, that you delight in playing the ogre, the wild beast on all occasions, provided, of course, you aren't whining, for there is in you a queer mixture of brutality and whining self-pity which I regret I shall not have the occasion to investigate further. No, what has decided me to leave you is the feeling which grows stronger every day that there is nothing more to be learnt from your lessons, that you are on the way to becoming a bad example, that you are gradually losing, in my humble opinion, those essential qualities that go to make up a man of prey. For any one who knows you, or thinks he knows you, the problem is definitely disquieting. Such a change can only be accounted for, according to my view, by the appearance in your life of extravagant ambitions, mostly of an intellectual order. Disquieting, monsieur le Président, very disquieting!

'For the first two years you compelled my admiration. That magnificent contempt of yours for all social, moral, human, and divine obligations, that carnivorous urge to set your teeth in everything, to plunge your muzzle into the warm, reeking flesh, yes, truly, for a young man of my type there was in all that a sort of grandeur. But then the mistakes began, not unaccountable ones perhaps, but none the less inexpiable. My admiration faded, monsieur le Président. And I began to see that if I remained with you any longer I might endanger my career and warp a talent which has not yet arrived at maturity.

'There is only one way in which I can show you my sincere gratitude—for you picked me out of the gutter; that is now known by everybody in the Parisian circles which you frequent—I have only one way of repaying my debt to you, that is by giving you some information on the people and affairs which are of particular concern to you at this moment. Here it is.

'M. Trintignan is a personal agent of M. Fourdillat, the minister. If you manage to rid yourself of the three hundred tons of Cantal lentils and the three hundred tons of Chile lentils, you will sustain, under present conditions of the

market, a loss that the sale of the supplementary quota of cryogen, even provided it is quick and normal, will not cover to the extent of more than seventy-five per cent. For exact information concerning Trintignan you could have recourse to the P.R.P. Agency, which you used to employ frequently in the past, though you have neglected to do so for the last five or six months. Incomprehensible! Incomprehensible!

'Your elder son, M. Lucien Pasquier, comes out of this business with flying colours. According to his reckoning there was little more than one chance in five that you would swallow Trintignan with your eyes shut. Unbelievable! Unbelievable! You need have no fear that M. Lucien will ever gamble at the roulette-table or sign a cheque that he is unable to meet. He is a cool-headed young man and has a future before him. If I were in your place, monsieur le Président, I should try to make a friend of him and possibly a partner.

'About three months ago you received a letter from an unknown person giving you confidential information about Sir Oliver Ellis. You threw the letter into the waste-paper basket. Astonishing! I can't say how astonishing! That was at the beginning of your affair with the Institut. I rescued the letter from the waste-paper basket, and you can find it: file 4, seventh drawer from the bottom. If you read it attentively, you will see that Sir Oliver has already, four times running, bought up for a mere song businesses for which all the preliminary expenses had been paid by over-confident people, or, to put it plainly, by fools. What a humiliation, monsieur le Président! In this connection Señor Obregon has all along been treated by you with the greatest unfairness, almost amounting to insolence. He is as innocent as a newborn babe. I wouldn't say as much for M. Ravier-Gaufre, but I won't dwell on this delicate matter. I greatly admired the stratagem employed yesterday morning at the beginning of the session. . . . I am referring to that proposal which was made to you to annul the promise of sale, a suggestion which, of course, you rejected. Although I am only a be-

ginner, I must say that I regard this as exceptionally subtle. Here is a new method which seems to me to introduce into business affairs a psychological element which will inevitably have to be reckoned with. The future victims of Sir Oliver Ellis had better look out.

‘Allow me to add a further piece of information which is out of my sphere but which I think will be of service to you. If you would like to know something about the way in which Mme Hermine Mauser, the lady in the rue Ballu, spends her enforced leisure, for instance during your trips to England or your visits to Montredon, ask for an explanation—discreetly, of course—from M. Félix Le Bilhec, no occupation, 23 rue de Martyrs.

‘This information, which I hasten to give you before we part, I ought perhaps to have offered earlier and directly, man to man. I hadn’t the courage, and you will understand why. You speak too loud, monsieur le Président, you shout too much, and you have reflexes that cannot always be foreseen.

‘I have just heard you come into the house. It is raining. You haven’t your car. You must be drenched. I’ve put the cable from Obregon where you will see it on your desk. What a surprise for you, monsieur le Président, and what a curious experience!

‘Please believe me to remain yours most sincerely, and, upon the whole, still admiringly,

‘BLAISE DELMUTER.’

‘PS.—Contrary to tradition, I am not carrying Mlle Delphine off with me. She is a gentle creature, and, I should say, very unhappy. But she does not appeal to me physically: she is too short and too fat.

‘PPS.—I am giving up wearing a morning coat for personal reasons which I leave to your imagination. I will send for my trunk by my sister’s servant. As for my salary for June, I shall shortly advise you of the address to which you will be kind enough to remit it. Thanking you in anticipation, believe me once more . . .’

Joseph had concluded the perusal of this long letter on the threshold of his office. He then became aware that the telephone was ringing incessantly on all three floors of the house. He called out:

'Mademoiselle !'

As no one replied he dashed into the secretary's office. It was a quarter to one. The female stenographer had gone off to lunch. So he went to the telephone, if only to stop the racket. He unhooked the receiver, thinking that he had better hold on for a moment and find out what was wanted.

It was Laurent's voice, a sad and troubled voice. And the voice said: 'Is that you, Joseph? It is you, isn't it? You know that Hélène is here with us, at our house. She is going to live with us. But I must speak to you, Joseph'

'I can't see you to-day. Besides, that would make no difference. I've quite made up my mind'

'All the same, I shall have to see you'

'Very well, then, telephone me to-night. Or better, to-morrow morning. To-day I'm not free.'

And Joseph put back the receiver on the hook, roughly, without waiting to hear any more. Then he went out into the passage and bawled out:

'Somebody! Somebody! Isn't there anybody about?'

Complete silence. Thereupon he made his way round the house. The bedrooms were deserted. Where were Lucien and Delphine? Where was Jean-Pierre, who for days had been wandering from floor to floor, the picture of misery? Where were the servants in this accursed house? Joseph went down to the basement. The servants were assembled there, having their lunch. Joseph paused in the doorway and growled out some vague remarks: 'I suppose I don't count? I suppose that I, the master of the house, am not to have any lunch?'

The butler rose like an automaton, slipped on his white jacket, and replied in a flat voice:

'Monsieur le Président's place is laid in the dining-room.'

Joseph got back to the ground floor just as the telephone

had started to ring again. 'And isn't there anybody in the place to stop that instrument of torture once and for all?' Nevertheless he proceeded to hold it to his temple. It was M. Trintignan. 'Good news, monsieur le Président,' he chuckled juicily. 'We have a safe buyer for your Chile lentils.'

Joseph could feel his mouth twisting and tightening. 'You, you're a scoundrel!' he yelled into the mouthpiece. 'So dry up! I'll be even with you sooner than you think.'

Thereupon he cut him off, sharp. Again the implacable, bell began to ring. If it was still Trintignan, then look out. This was only the beginning. He took up the receiver. It was M. Sanasoff. 'Hallo! hallo!' came the murmur of his voice with its Russian accent. 'Have you heard, dear sir, that the Marquis de Janville has gastric flu? But he's already much better. He will be up on Saturday, and he'll go and vote for you. He's definitely promised me that.'

Joseph began to dance with rage. 'Shut up!' he spluttered into the telephone. 'D'you hear me, shut up! Are you a liar or just a blasted fool?'

XVII

*Laurent Pasquier to Mme Cécile Pasquier, Hôtel Pontchartrain,
New Orleans, Louisiana, U.S.A.*

Saturday, 27th June, 1925.

I have been wanting to write to you ever since Thursday evening, dear Cécile, but it was Jacqueline who wrote, though only briefly, so she told me. At the Transatlantique office they tell me there are frequent services at this time of the year, so I am counting on your having received Jacqueline's letter before this. To-night I'm going to pick up the threads and give you the continuation. . . . I say the continuation, not the *dénouement*: there never is a *dénouement*. Life goes on with its endless troubles. There is no *dénouement*, unless it be on the frozen planets.

As Jacqueline told you, our sister-in-law Hélène arrived here, at our place, late on Thursday morning. She was on foot. I fancy she had taken the Place Clichy-Gobelins bus, which stops at the corner of the rue Soufflot. It would be difficult to give you an idea of the expression on her face. For the last year, or rather for the last two years, I have been worried about her, and I think you have been so, too. That affection of frivolity, flightiness, insolence! None of that really suited her. But on Thursday morning we had the feeling, Jacqueline and I, of greeting a quite different woman, aged by at least ten years, and yet cold, calm—deadly calm.

It was nearly noon. Jacqueline said at once: 'Have you come to lunch with us, Hélène?' She shook her head faintly and answered: 'No, I've come to ask you to take me in, indefinitely.' And as we stared at her, both of us, in astonishment, she added: 'Forgive me. I don't know where else to go. I haven't even any money. We are going to be divorced. Do you understand, Laurent? We are going to part, Joseph and I. Joseph ordered me out of the house. In any case I had no intention of staying on . . . there.'

We knew, of course, that there were secret troubles in the life of Joseph; but we were so taken aback that for several minutes we made no answer. It is a terrible thing to see a creature driven from its natural place, a woman who only the day before was flattered, fêted, treated everywhere like a queen, and who arrives like that, on foot, her little handbag tucked under her arm, and sits down quietly in a chair and says: 'Here I am, all is over. I have nowhere to go.'

I stared at her and remained dumb with sympathy and astonishment. Then Line did the simplest and most natural thing. She put her arm round Hélène and kissed her on the forehead, lightly, without emphasis. Then she said, at once: 'I'll give you our little boy's room. It's quite a nice room, with a dressing-room, and the divan is a comfortable one.'

'Forgive me,' said Hélène in a low but steady voice, 'forgive me, Jacqueline, if I ask you if you can also put up Finette. She is to come to me this afternoon with our luggage. Oh,

nothing very big. All this is just for the moment, Jacqueline, but I don't want to go to a hotel. . . .'

'Don't worry,' said Line, 'we can put the divan from the sitting-room in your bedroom, so that Delphine can sleep with you. Come with me, Hélène. It'll all be ready in a quarter of an hour.'

As the two women rose to leave the room Jacqueline said, gently:

'We mustn't forget mother; you'll meet her at lunch. What do you want her to be told?'

Then for the first time in the conversation Hélène's face clouded over. She replied hastily:

'Nothing, please, not a word for the present. And if mother asks for some explanation, then we must say that Joseph is travelling and that you and I have some work to do together. We must play for time.'

Thereupon Hélène and Jacqueline left the room. I began to recover from the first shock of emotion and to consider the events themselves. Since the death of the Strohls of Nancy, Hélène has no longer any relatives, and I can readily understand her unwillingness to go to a hotel. My feeling was that one must first of all give tempers time to cool down and then as promptly as possible begin negotiations, as Joseph would say in his jargon, and try to come to some arrangement. I think these crises at fifty are extremely dangerous. But after all there are the children!

Strange to say, at lunch mother hardly said a word. She has greatly aged. At times she is, or at least appears to be, very far away from us. But she is still very quick to realize the presence of misfortune. She guesses and understands everything. And when she says nothing, it is because, with her long experience of suffering, she feels dimly that it is best to appear to comprehend nothing.

Finette turned up in the early afternoon. She came along in a taxi with a couple of suit-cases. What a strange girl! What a reserved and sombre disposition! In two whole days she hasn't opened her mouth more than three times.

She has only asked Jacqueline, who told me about it later, if it was necessary to have a dowry to go into a nunnery, and what the amount would have to be.

Incidentally, Hélène mentioned Lucien, their eldest, who has just bought himself a car and is at the moment touring the centre of France.

No sooner had Hélène got her luggage than she started to knit with complete composure. I had rather expected her to go out, to see a lawyer. But she didn't appear to be even contemplating such a thing. Seeing her thus is like looking at a dead soul, a creature from whom the spirit has flown. Can this possibly be Joseph's doing?

Shortly after lunch I took it upon myself to telephone to Joseph. He himself answered, in a very cross voice, that he couldn't see me at once, and asked me to call him up again during the evening.

I paid my daily visit to the Collège de France and worked there all the afternoon. When I got home in the evening there was nothing new. Hélène was still knitting. From time to time she would put down her needles and play with our children. She seemed to be not so much above recent events as beside them, outside them. Delphine was reading in a corner. A little later she helped to lay the table. They seemed both of them to have brought into the house a contagious silence, a terrifying silence; even the children were hushed by it, and played in a corner with hardly a sound. When we were about to sit down to table for the evening meal, Hélène said very simply: 'Jean-Pierre hasn't come. It's very strange.' Nothing more for that night.

Cécile dear, let me go straight to what is most important. Yesterday, that is to say, Friday, I made repeated efforts to reach Joseph by telephone. Each time the secretary replied that M. Pasquier was not in the house. I had hoped to get some information out of Delmuter. The girl at the telephone said each time that M. Delmuter was away, probably on holiday, so that it would be impossible to get him on the wire or even to see him at the rue Taitbout. I was just

beginning to wonder whether I might not have to go against instructions and go and call on Joseph, when he telephoned. That was yesterday in the latter part of the day. He said abruptly: 'Come to-morrow about two o'clock. I shall expect you at my place.' Thinking of Hélène, I wanted to make some inquiry about the boy, I mean Jean-Pierre; but he seemed to be in a very bad temper. He rang off with his usual abruptness.

Meanwhile, among us at the place du Panthéon a most surprising silence still reigned. Delphine was reading a big book. Hélène was knitting a pull-over. She made no mention of consulting a lawyer, and I sometimes wondered whether she was thinking seriously of what a divorce entails, or whether she was merely going to bow her head to the storm and let the facts themselves deal out their wild justice. I make no mention of Jacqueline: she always knows what to say and do in such circumstances.

So I went to the rue Taibout in the early afternoon. I was in such haste that I arrived a whole quarter of an hour before the appointment, and I discovered Joseph in the picture gallery on the first floor of their house. He was not a pleasant sight. He was seated, or rather, sunk in an arm-chair, his arms hanging down, his legs lifeless. On inquiring later of the girl in the secretary's office I gathered that he had spent the whole of Friday in—what do you think, Cécile dear? In visits and calls of all sorts apropos of his candidature for the Institut!

He asked me to sit down, without himself stirring. The footman was standing in front of him like someone who has just delivered a report and is awaiting a reply. Joseph was slow to reply. Finally he growled: 'You needn't wait. I'll go up myself presently.'

When the footman had gone, Joseph turned towards me. He said: 'Have a cigar?'

'No, thanks, I don't smoke'

'Well, you miss a great deal. But that's your look-out'

He began to smoke. I plucked up my courage and began my little speech: 'Joseph, your wife has been with us now

It was perhaps a quarter to three when Joseph started to go out again, saying: 'Just stay here, Laurent. I'm going to speak to the boy. If there's a call on the telephone, come straight away and fetch me. You see, I haven't a soul I can trust. You're thinking of Blaise Delmutter? He's a little rotter. Got to do everything myself. . . .'

At that moment the telephone rang out once more, and again Joseph leapt forward. He barked into the receiver 'M. Joseph Pasquier speaking. Ah, so it's you, Mairesse . . . What! You're sure? You're sure! Say it again, Mairesse. But . . . but . . . It's impossible. Go and get it confirmed. No, no, don't. Come here at once. I don't care. I don't care a damn!'

He, who is never pale, suddenly exhibited a horrible pallor, and I thought he was going to fall. For two or three minutes he stood there, in front of the telephone closet. Yes, I thought he was going to fall and I went towards him. Then he gave me a smile, a sickly green smile, and, staggering to his arm-chair, he murmured: 'It's that business of the Institut which has just gone phut in my hands. A smack in the eye, my poor Laurent, nothing less than a smack in the eye!'

And there he stayed, sprawling in his chair, with air-bubbles breaking between his half-open lips. From time to time, with an air of peevish disgust, he murmured: 'Yes, yes, yes, yes. That's that.' And he tried to laugh.

I learnt—I tell you this now, so as not to have to come back to it later—I learnt from Mairesse-Miral, whom I saw in the evening, and I also read in the papers, that the 'smack' had been of a very humiliating kind. There were twenty-seven voters. M. Simionescault was elected on the first ballot by eighteen votes to two, yes, exactly two for Joseph. There were seven blank papers; I needn't say any more. It's a miserable business.

Then Joseph got up and began to walk about the gallery I followed him with my eye, in silence. I don't know much about modern painting. There were bright colours on the walls, and even graceful designs, yet the disorder was obvious,

yes, the disorder was distressing to an outsider like myself, and I had the feeling that it reflected only too clearly the disorder that used to reign and, alas, still reigns in Joseph's mind, and indeed all over the world, this most unhappy world of ours.

It was then that the telephone rang out once more. Joseph said to me: 'You see, I'm quite alone here. The young woman in the secretary's office is taking the week-end off. That little Delmuter is an ungrateful little rotter, to say the least. The servants pay no attention to me. I've no idea where my children are. As for H  l  ne . . . Ah, as for H  l  ne. . . . You know, the matter is perfectly clear. First, not a farthing for alimony. And I shall go through with it to the end. I'll drag her in the mud. I'll dishonour her. I'll have my revenge. I'm sick of this telephone. Oblige me by answering it. I can't stand it any longer.' Thereupon he bounced out.

In all that is about to follow I have the feeling that my conduct was hardly comprehensible. It's always like that when one has anything to do with Joseph. Be lenient with me, sister, I beg. I was very worried and unhappy, and convinced that it was useless to reason with a madman. This dreadful tragedy will remain associated in my mind with the sound of telephone bells and voices issuing from the void to utter absurdities.

I took up the telephone, since there was no one else to attend to it. Besides, Jacqueline was aware that I was with Joseph and she might have wished to speak to me. So I picked up the receiver. It was a woman's voice, a fine, rich contralto voice: 'M. Bradignan'—that, or something like it—'understands that M. Joseph Pasquier must have been mistaken, or that possibly he was unwell, and did not quite realize what he was saying. The buyer in view for the Chile lentils is a perfectly reliable person, and he must have a reply before to-night. M. Bradignan definitely insists that M. Joseph Pasquier . . .' That's approximately what I gathered. It was evidently about some affair of a very complicated nature, as all Joseph's affairs are, I believe. I looked round for

Joseph. He hadn't returned. Then I hung up. The bell rang out again, and as there appeared to be no one to answer it, in sheer desperation, I picked up the receiver once more. What I heard was quite incomprehensible to me: 'Hallo, hallo! This is the Ravier-Gaufre office. Will you kindly inform M. Pasquier . . .' At that moment I heard some violent blows being struck upstairs, blows which seemed to reverberate through the whole structure of the house. And then almost immediately after, a swift shadow passed before the sun, something inexplicable, like a bird in full flight. The voice in the telephone went on: 'M. Ravier-Gaufre has gone abroad. He won't be back in Paris before September. Kindly make a written note of this.'

On hearing that noise in the house I remembered the axe. The axe! Do you remember father rushing after the landlord with a wood-chopper and ending up by cutting a water-pipe and flooding the house? The axe! Truly an instrument of destiny in our family history.

I began to run, and just as I reached the stairway I heard a cry, a terrible cry that is still ringing in my ears, a cry that has not yet ceased to traverse the earth; a cry that perhaps you too have heard, far away in the other hemisphere. When I reached the landing of the second floor I met Joseph, who was coming downstairs, yelling. I could get nothing out of him. He was past seeing or comprehending anything. I followed him. I began to run, too, seized and sucked in by this whirlwind of madness. Still running, we reached the courtyard of the house.

Little Jean-Pierre lay there, stretched out on the flagstones, covered with dust. He was bleeding profusely from the nose. He looked like some animal struck down with a mallet. Dreadful to say, he made an effort to raise himself on his elbow. And the blood was gushing from his nose like a fountain.

Joseph sprang towards the boy and picked him up in his arms. Nineteen! Almost a man. Jean-Pierre isn't a giant, but he is fairly tall, and it was awful to see that great lanky adolescent, with his thin legs and his long arms hanging down.

Joseph rushed off like a man demented. He climbed up the stairs, running and shouting. The boy's blood fell on the flagstones, on the carpets, on the parquets. It spurted against the furniture and the walls. Joseph continued to run and I followed, and I believe that I, too, was shouting. What? I can't imagine.

Joseph came to a standstill at last in the boy's room. It was then that I saw that the window was wide open and that the door had been split down the middle with blows from an axe. Too late, obviously. The child had already flung himself out of the window.

Joseph laid the lad on the bed and then turned towards me, saying: 'You're a doctor! Well then, do your duty! Save him or I'll kill myself. Save him. It's your job. Go ahead, do something.'

I began examining Jean-Pierre and undressing him. I said to Joseph: 'Ring for the servants. Bring me some alcohol. Have some water boiled. And get hold of someone to telephone to Chabot, Littré 27-22. Then pull yourself together. It's too soon to say anything.'

The boy could no longer speak. He could not even groan. He only gazed at me with great dilated eyes, filled with a ghastly weariness.

A little later, while I was bathing the boy's face, Joseph came back with the footman and the chef. I gave orders, and asked for what I needed. Joseph remained there with me. Even then he couldn't be quiet. He kept saying from time to time: 'Save him and I'll do something. I don't know what I'll do, but I'll do something. I want to do something. I'm choking, choking! I'm dying. No, no . . . don't bother about me. I say that, but I'm still sound.'

I was concentrating on what I was doing and barely heeded him. Then he came close up to me and said in a low voice: 'I know you, Laurent. You think I'm being punished. No use your denying it. I know your ideas. Punished for what? Will you please tell me?'

There he stopped. Glancing furtively at him, I could easily

guess the trend of his thoughts: 'Punished for what? For what? For being as I am? It's like blaming a lion for having claws or a cobra for secreting venom.'

Then he began to moan again: 'It isn't fatal, is it? Swear that you'll save him.' And then suddenly, gasping and snivelling: 'I can't go on living like this. No, no, no! The worst of it is that I am incapable of living any other way. I know myself! I know myself! Ah, look out, don't hurt him. He doesn't say a word. You don't say a word either. You're awful, you people, you never say a thing. . . .'

Chabot arrived very promptly. They had been able to reach him during a consultation at his own house. The boy has a fractured pelvis; fracture of the skull is still doubtful. The first lumbar puncture did not bring blood. It seems probable that the nasal haemorrhage is due to a fracture of the bones of the nose itself. Three floors—it's a terrible height to fall. Chabot doesn't consider the boy's condition desperate, but we must be prepared for anything.

I spent the afternoon with the patient. Then Chabot sent his house-surgeon for the early part of the night. As I was about to leave the room I looked Joseph full in the face, and I must confess that does not happen to me very often. He turned away his eyes and began to stammer, his voice faint, trembling. He said: 'Are you going back home? Then go and get Héléne. Yes, go and get Héléne. You surely won't say no.'

Héléne is with her boy. I'll write to you the day after to-morrow and tell you what happened. Nothing is ever ended in this wretched world of ours. There is no rest, says Goethe, except on the icy mountain-tops. Alas, even that isn't true. There is no remission except on the dead planets, where all life has been abolished for millions of centuries and where even memory itself is asleep for evermore.

I kiss your hands, sister.

Your

LAURENT.